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## KNIGHT-ERRANT

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# KNIGHT-ERRANT

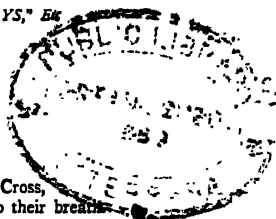
BY

EDNA LYALL

AUTHOR OF

"DONOVAN," "WE TWO," "WON BY WAITING,"

"IN THE GOLDEN DAYS," Etc



But all through life I see a Cross,  
Where sons of God yield up their breath;  
There is no gain except by loss,  
There is no life except by death,  
There is no vision but by Faith,  
Nor glory but by bearing shame,  
Nor Justice but by taking blame:  
And that Eternal Passion saith,  
'Be emptied of glory and right and name.'

*Olrig Grange.* WALTER C. SMITH.

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TO  
EVANGELINE JAMESON

*' Searching my heart for all that touches you,  
I find there only love and love's good-will.'*



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# KNIGHT-ERRANT

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## CHAPTER I

### 'THE HAPPIEST MAN IN NAPLES'

'They came at a delicate plain called Ease, where they went with much content; but that plain was but narrow, so they were quickly got over it.'—*Pilgrim's Progress*.

'PRESTO! off with the paper! let us see how they look!' exclaimed a fresh, mellow voice.

'Permit me, signore,' interposed the Neapolitan stationer who presided behind the counter of a shop in the Toledo, and taking the little white packet from the hands of the speaker he slipped the blade of his penknife through the wrapper, drew forth with a flourish one of the cards within, and, bowing and smiling, handed it to his customer. 'There, signore, and accept with it my sincere congratulations.'

The young man glanced eagerly at the card, upon which was engraved in copperplate the name,—

### 'AVVOCATO CARLO POERIO DONATI.'

It was to him the sign and symbol of manhood, of freedom; it meant that he turned his back upon examinations and tutelage; it meant that he was at length free to declare the love which for many years had been the great guiding influence of his life.

'Ah, Signor Pietro,' he replied, turning to the friendly old shopkeeper with a smile which illumined his whole face, 'I am the happiest man in Naples to-day! Come, Enrico, you are not half enough excited!' and turning to his friend, who stood beside him watching the scene with good-humoured indifference, he caught a similar little packet from his hand, and, tearing it open, produced a card bearing the name,—

### 'AVVOCATO ENRICO RITTER.'

Enrico was of German parentage, but the Ritters had lived for half-a-century in Naples and were naturalised; nevertheless, spite of his Italian education, Enrico remained German to the backbone, and presented in every way a most curious contrast to his friend and companion.

'Why, devil take the cards! they're not so much to me as to you,' he exclaimed, with a laugh. 'Signor Pietro does not expect to see me wild with excitement over a trumpery piece of pasteboard.'

'Most matter-of-fact Enrico! Where is your imagination?' cried Carlo, laughing. 'Can the magic word *Avvocato* call up to your German brain no visions of the future?'

'Visions?' grumbled Enrico, with assumed despondency; 'ay, visions of hot courts, long cases, rusty gowns, and scant fees.'

Both Carlo and the stationer laughed heartily at the dolorous face of the speaker.

'Well, Signor Pietro, it was ever the same story; was it not? He is prosaic now as when we came to you years ago for note-books and pens on our way from the *Ginnasio*. But come, it is getting late; I must be off, Enrico. Good-day to you, Signor Pietro, and many thanks for your congratulations.'

The two friends left the shop and walked on through the busy, crowded streets to the Piazza del Plebiscito. More than one passer-by turned to glance at Carlo's beautiful face; for, truth to tell, good looks are the exception, not the rule, in Naples, and among the swarthy or sallow Neapolitans his rich, ruddy-brown colouring could not fail to win notice. The face was singularly attractive, not only from the beauty of its well-cut features, but from the unaffected modesty of the expression, and the sweetness of the dark, liquid eyes. He looked what he had termed himself—the happiest man in Naples. If in appearance he lacked anything it was height; but we cannot all be heroes of six feet, and Carlo, though small and slight, was so well proportioned, so lithe and active, so imbued with the grace common to most Italians, that it was impossible to wish for any change in him. He might that day have stood as a true impersonation of Optimism, while Enrico Ritter, on the other hand, might well have posed as the ideal Pessimist.

Enrico was of the Germans, German; there was no mistaking that fair, straight hair and moustache, that light colouring and broad face, those small, light-grey eyes, honest, hard, yet with some good-humour in their expression which contradicted the cynical mouth. What had first drawn two

such curiously contrasted men together it was impossible to say; scientists might have argued that it was the very fact that they were polar opposites. But, whatever the cause of their friendship, friends they were in the best sense of the word, and their friendship had stood the wear and tear of ten years.

By this time they had reached the Piazza; the afternoon sun was shining on the red walls of the Palazzo Reale, lighting up the heavy arcades of the San Carlo, glorifying the dome and stately front of the Church of S. Francesco di Paolo. It seemed a strange medley of ancient and modern, haunted by memories of King Bomba's cruelties,—haunted by visions of Garibaldi and Carlo Poerio, while hither and thither plied the busy trams, and amid a gay throng of people dressed in the latest Parisian fashion there filed slowly past a procession of white-robed monks.

'Ten minutes to spare before my horse is ready,' said Carlo, looking at his watch; 'let us have some coffee;' and so saying he led the way into the nearest restaurant. Enrico paused to buy an evening paper, then followed his friend.

The place was crowded, and there arose a confused babel of voices, a mingling of French, English, and Italian. Carlo had seated himself at one of the small marble tables, and, since Enrico seemed more inclined to read his paper than to talk, was fain to listen to the discussion going on between two English tourists close by.

Possibly they thought themselves practically alone in this foreign assembly; certainly it did not occur to them that their very Italian-looking neighbour understood and spoke their language as well as his own, for they were talking freely on subjects which Englishmen are not wont to speak of in public.

'But, really now,' urged the younger of the two, with some warmth, 'you can't possibly maintain such a notion. Do you think we are not improved,—vastly improved, in the last two hundred years?'

'The increase of civilisation gives us a better appearance, I grant,' said the elder, 'but I do not believe the sum total of evil is lessened.'

Carlo listened attentively, for this dreary doctrine was opposed to his whole nature.

'Why, turn to history,' exclaimed the younger man, 'see how indifferent people were to suffering, and then look at our nineteenth century, with its innumerable charities, its missions, its hospitals, its guilds.'

'True, quite true,' said the elder man, quietly; 'a wave of philanthropy is passing over us; there is much talk—even, I admit, much good work, but men are not more willing to live the life of the Crucified.'

The younger man was silent. Hitherto he had been very ready with his replies, now he fell into deep thought. Carlo Donati, too, was struck by those last words. They broke in very painfully upon his rapturous happiness, his joyful anticipations. He had been spared most of the usual doubts and fears of a lover; he was practically sure of Francesca Britton's love, and already he had received her father's permission to propose to her, Captain Britton having only stipulated that he should wait till his education was finished.

Now his time of probation was over; within a few days, nay, perhaps within a few hours, Francesca might be his own. Could he bear on that day, of all others, to dream of the possibility of a cloud arising? His sky was so clear, his life had been so happy and successful, the very thought of gathering darkness on the horizon was torture to him; 'Let my happiness last! oh, let it last!' was his inward cry, and, as if in answer, there floated back to him the stranger's words, and he knew that they were true: 'Men are not more willing to live the life of the Crucified.'

Involuntarily he turned to glance at the man who had disturbed his peace, and saw a strong, intellectual face, which, notwithstanding traces of deep thought and hard conflict, bore a calm and tranquil expression. But the conversation had been checked by those grave words, the stranger called the waiter, paid for his coffee, tucked his 'Baedeker' under his arm, and rose to go.

Carlo followed him with his eyes as he left the restaurant; he felt strongly that curious conviction which comes to some people when a stranger has unconsciously influenced them, that in this world, or some other, they will infallibly meet again.

So engrossed had he been with the two Englishmen and their talk that he had not heeded his friend. He had not seen the start of surprise and dismay with which Enrico had noted a paragraph in the *Piccolo*. What was there in those brief lines which filled him with apprehension? Why did he glance with such anxiety and regret at Carlo, and then once again read that unwelcome paragraph?

'We understand that the season will be commenced at Whitsuntide at the Teatro Mercadante, with the operatic company of Signor Merlino. Madame Merlino, whose singing has

created a very favourable impression in America, will be the prima donna.'

All the indifference had vanished now from Enrico's face. A dreadful annoyance awaited his friend, and that it should reach him to-day of all days seemed to him intolerable. He would at any rate do his best to give him a respite, Carlo should at least propose to Miss Britton, and enjoy if it were even but a few hours of unalloyed happiness. Seizing his opportunity, when his companion turned to watch the Englishmen as they left the restaurant, Enrico tore off the corner containing the unwelcome news, and was about to thrust it into his pocket when Carlo checked him with a question,—

'What is it? About our examinations?'

'No,' said Enrico, composedly; 'I saw nothing about them. I only wanted a scrap of paper to wrap up these confounded cards; thanks to your eagerness to see them, they're all loose in my pocket.'

So saying, he deliberately wrapped the cards in the paper containing the bad news, and pushed the rest of the *Piccolo* towards his friend. 'Take it home with you if you like, I have done with it.'

'And I,' said Carlo, laughing, 'hope to have little time for it.' He took it nevertheless, stowed it away in his pocket and got up to go.

'I'll walk with you as far as the stable,' said Enrico. 'Now follow my advice and ride home calmly. If you go on in this state of fever you will not be fit for your interview with that stately old Englishman, upon whom you have to make a good impression as future son-in-law.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' said Carlo, laughing gaily. 'Make an impression, indeed! Do you forget that we have been next-door neighbours this age, and that he knows me as well as you do?'

'An impossibility,' said Enrico, smiling, 'for with me I have taught you, as we say in Germany, to be as you are to yourself. Now with that old English captain you walk as though treading on eggs, you are courteous and deferential; you never forget that you hope to be his son-in-law, and you'll never quarrel with him,—at any rate not until the hope has become a tame reality.'

The dry, sardonic tone in which this had been spoken, turned Carlo's indignant protest to laughter.

'The only topic on which we are likely to quarrel is politics; and as he knows nothing of Italian affairs, one

needs now and then adroitly to turn the conversation. But don't make me speak against Captain Britton, to-day, *amico mio*.'

'Ah, poor fellow!' said Enrico, pityingly; 'I knew he would prove the crumpled rose-leaf to destroy your perfect bliss. There is always a father-in-law, or a mother-in-law, or a cantankerous relative, who kicks up a row about the settlements. Don't you expect the course of your true love to run smooth—that's against nature.'

As he spoke he glanced rather anxiously at a large hoarding which they were approaching, rapidly running his eye over the theatrical posters, but, much to his relief, the Mercadante bills were not yet out.

'You are as depressing as a funeral!' said Carlo, much tickled by the notion that the substantial Englishman was a crumpled rose-leaf; 'and, indeed, if I have no worse crook in my lot than Captain Britton, I shall fare well. No one could have been more courteous and helpful to my mother all these years, no one could have been more genial and hospitable to me. Of course we all have our faults.'

'Too true!' said Enrico, mockingly. 'The Englishman loves a lord, and has an eye to the main chance, and knows that you are heir to a certain rich uncle, and that unless the money is secured and tied up in the orthodox English fashion, it will be flung away upon "Young Italy," or some hare-brained scheme for educating organ-grinders.'

'If we were not in the public street I would punish you well!' cried Carlo. 'There never was such a fellow for imputing low motives to all the world.'

'Well, well, rail at me as you like,' said Enrico, indifferently; 'but as yet I have never found myself at fault in assuming that egoism rules the universe. Ah, your horse is waiting for you, I see, and the ostler tries to look hot and tired to cajole a large coin from you. *A rivederci*! But I advise you to avoid Naples for the next few days; don't come to me for sympathy in your rapture, for I've not the smallest doubt that love is egoism, and marriage is egoism, and——'

'You are incorrigible!' cried Carlo, as he mounted the beautiful Arab which was waiting for him. 'I'll not wait to hear you out.' And, with a wave of the hand, he rode off, looking back laughingly at the interrupted egoist, who, with a shrug of the shoulders, turned away.

And yet it was something quite other than egoism which brought a grave look to Enrico's face as he walked home

through the sunny streets. Suddenly perceiving an upright, alert-looking old man on the opposite side of the way, he crossed the road and hastened after him.

'Pardon me, Signor Piale!' he exclaimed, 'but may I ask you a question? You are probably acquainted with all that is going on in the musical world. Is this true that I see to-day in the *Piccolo*? Is Merlino's Company really coming to the Mercadante?'

'*Diavolo!* it is true enough, more's the pity,' replied the old man; 'but I have not said a word of it to my pupil. Carlo is over-sensitive, he felt that affair too much; only of late has he seemed to have forgotten it somewhat. He is one whose life should have been exempt from shadows.'

'I should have thought that common decency would have kept Merlino away from Naples,' said Enrico, hotly.

'Merlino does not care a fig for common decency,' said the old musician. 'He is no credit to our profession. Probably he knows well enough that the Merlino-Donati scandal is just fresh enough in men's minds to make his operas draw well.'

'Let us, at least, do our best to keep back the ill news as long as possible,' said Enrico; 'it will be a frightful annoyance to Carlo just now, and I do believe it will be the death of his mother.'

'Tis always the innocent who suffer for the guilty,' said the old singing-master, giving a fierce rub to his parchment-like cheek. 'If ever there was one who deserved to be free from care, why it is Carlo; there are but few now-a-days who could show so blameless a life.'

'You speak very truly,' said Enrico. 'Let us hope his blameless life will weigh with worthy Captain Britton, and prove heavier than the family skeleton.'

---



## CHAPTER II

## A GOODLY HERITAGE

'It is not best in an inglorious ease  
 To sink and dull content,  
 When wild revolts and hopeless miseries  
 The unquiet nations fill ;

\* \* \* \* \*

Nay, best it is indeed  
 To spend ourselves upon the general good ;  
 And, oft misunderstood,  
 To strive to lift the knees and limbs that bleed.  
 This is the best, the fullest meed.  
 Let ignorance assail or hatred sneer,  
 Who loves his race he shall not fear ;  
 He suffers not for long,  
 Who doth his soul possess in loving, and grows strong.'

LEWIS MORRIS.

THE old singing-master had not exaggerated matters. Though inclined to see everything connected with his favourite pupil through rose-coloured spectacles, his words were in this instance strictly true. Carlo had passed scathless through all the temptations of Neapolitan life ; his history would bear the full light of day ; it was impossible to imagine any one more strictly honourable, more simple and open-minded. But then, certainly, Nature had been to him almost prodigal in her gifts. To begin with, he came of a good family, and that not in the vulgar acceptation of the word. The Donati were not of noble birth, but for five or six generations they had been well educated, and had earned quite an unusual reputation in the various learned professions which they had followed. Faults of temper or of judgment they might have shown, but no Donati had ever been guilty of an act of meanness, nor had there been in any one of them a single grain of insincerity. To belong to a family which has earned well-deserved respect, to be able to look back upon forefathers who have lived well and bravely, to know that before you existed your father, and his father before him, spoke for freedom and pleaded the cause of the people, this is indeed a birthright worth having. An inheritance of money may or may not be a desirable thing, but an inheritance of character, an ancestry of generous, true-hearted men, who did justly, and loved mercy, and walked humbly with their God, this is a thing that kings might covet.

Carlo had undoubtedly inherited a noble character, or rather had inherited certain tendencies, and as yet, by his life, had helped to develope, not to arrest, their growth.

At the close of the last century there had been born a certain Bruno Donati. People had prophesied great things of him; he had established, with almost unheard-of rapidity, a great reputation as an advocate, he had married a beautiful heiress, he was assuredly a man who would 'rise'—so said the world. He did rise, but not in the way predicted. Regardless of his reputation, regardless of self altogether, he joined the patriot party who were struggling to overthrow the hated tyranny of the Neapolitan Bourbons. Leaving his home, and taking a tender farewell of his wife and his little children, he set off one June morning for Cilento, the place which had been chosen for a small rising. At first a certain measure of success encouraged the patriots; they were able to take the little fort of Palinuro, and to hoist the tricoloured flag.

But those brave pioneers knew well that they were taking their lives in their hands. They had achieved a success which must draw the attention of the whole country upon them. In hot haste General Delcaretto was sent down to attack them with six thousand men, and no mercy was shown. Twenty of the patriots were shot without trial; twenty-six others, and amongst them Bruno Donati, were executed. The young advocate had, as it seemed, sacrificed his life for a hopeless cause; he was never again to return to his beautiful home, but General Delcaretto caused his head to be paraded in front of the house before the eyes of his widow and his fatherless children. Then, when the people had been ruined, a commune or two suppressed, and the insurrection completely stamped out, the General returned to Naples to be rewarded for his gallantry by receiving the title of Marquis, a decoration of a knightly order, and a pension.

Bruno Donati's widow did not die until she had educated her two sons, and had seen that the younger one, also Bruno, was likely to be just such a man as his father. She did not realise how much alike the story of the two Brunos would be.

Both sons followed their father's profession, but the younger one was so much engrossed in the revolutionary movement of the time that he did not make much way in it. Instead of so doing, he joined 'Young Italy,' studied deeply under the guidance of Mazzini, and at length enrolled himself in Garibaldi's gallant little army.

Carlo's earliest recollections were of a hot August day in

the year 1862. He, as a little fellow, had sat beside his mother in a carriage outside the post-office at Pozzuoli, and some one had brought them the news of Garibaldi's defeat at Aspromonte, and with that the tidings that Bruno Donati was dangerously wounded. Carlo could even now see vividly his mother's deathly face as she read the news, could remember his puzzled wonder as to what it all meant, and whether it could possibly be that his father would never return.

But the second Bruno Donati was in some ways happier than his father; he was brought back from Aspromonte to his own home, where he lingered for a month—a month which proved of extraordinary value in his son's education. The child was too young to feel his father's death as a life-long grief, but he was just old enough to carry away from that death-bed a beautiful and unfading memory. Upon his childish brain was stamped the conviction that to die for '*La Patria*' was a very happy thing, that the sacrifice of self for others was the only true greatness, and that even such a failure as Aspromonte was not to be accounted failure—that right could not fail in the long run. '*Pazienza! pazienza!*' was the word constantly on the lips of the dying patriot—the word which always connected itself with his memory in the mind of his son. On Bruno Donati's dying face there had been that 'look of faith in renunciation' which was stamped upon the face of his teacher, Mazzini, and the look lived on in the child's heart.

'Carlino,' his father had said tenderly, on the very last day of his life,—'Carlino *mio*, thou wilt be a man one day.'

'How nice it will be when I am a man like you, father!' cried the boy eagerly.

The dying man smiled sadly.

'Remember always to comfort and shield thy mother; and Nita—take good care of Nita.'

'Why, father, Nita is older than I am, a whole year older!' exclaimed the child.

'But Nita is a woman, and my Carlo must be her brave protector; promise me that, my son.'

'I promise, father,' said the little fellow, squeezing the cold hand that clasped his. 'And, father, dear father, I may have your sword, may I not? You'll not leave it to Uncle Guido, who has one already? For if I have it, father, then I could fight the brigands if they took Nita; could I not?'

The dying man smiled, touched by the innocent literalness of the reply. He caught Carlo to his breast, holding him in a long, close embrace.

‘Why, father, I do believe you’ll soon be well!’ cried the boy, gleefully, feeling the power of those strong arms round him. He did not know that a sudden strength is often death’s forerunner.

And in a sense he little meant his words came true, for by the next morning the second Bruno Donati had entered into the martyr’s rest, and it was ‘well’ with him.

After this Carlo’s life had been uneventful; the recollection of his father did not sadden him, on the contrary, it raised and stimulated him. For an Italian boy he had an unusually free and healthy life; his mother could never make up her mind to leave the country-house where they had been passing their *villeggiatura* during that summer of 1862, and in which her husband had died. They lived all the year round at the Villa Bruno, and a kindly old priest at Pozzuoli taught the boy until he was old enough to go in every day to the *Ginnasio* at Naples.

Here he entered into his lifelong friendship with Enrico Ritter, and learnt much through his intercourse with the German family, whose house became his head-quarters when he was in Naples. The Ritters, deeming the country life dull for the boy, were constantly inviting him to stay with them, and giving him brief snatches of gaiety. Nominally Lutherans, the worthy Germans were practically materialists, and it was largely owing to his visits at the Ritters that Carlo first became dissatisfied with the religion in which his mother had educated him. Equally was he dissatisfied with the conventional acceptance of Christianity and the real scepticism which prevailed in the Ritter household. For a year or two he puzzled his brain over the vexed question; finally he took the decisive step and resolved to go no more to church. This caused much pain to his mother and to his old friend, Father Cristoforo; and though plunging deeply into that sort of worship at the shrine of beautiful Nature which is the reaction from formalism, he felt a want in his life.

Shortly before this a house close to the Villa Bruno, which for some years had been untenanted, had been taken by an Englishman named Captain Britton. He had just lost his wife; and the home at San Remo, where his children had been born, and to which he had returned year by year when off duty, had grown intolerable to him. He retired from the service, and, taking a fancy to the neighbourhood of Naples, settled down at Casa Bella, and made up his mind to live and die there. He had only two children—Francesca, a beautiful

girl about a year younger than Carlo—so named after an Italian friend of the family—and Sibyl, a fairy-like little child of two years old. Miss Claremont, Francesca's governess, or, as everyone called her, 'Clare,' had the management of the house, and it was largely owing to her that a very close intimacy soon sprang up between the two neighbouring families.

Carlo and Francesca were at first not of an age for falling in love. They became fast friends, and Carlo in his rather lonely life was enchanted to find that the English girl was allowed almost unlimited freedom. She was wholly unlike his convent-bred sister, who, since her mother was an invalid, was allowed to come home now and then for a day or two. Nita was beautiful, and sang like an angel, and was a devout little Catholic, and did her best to teach him the error of his ways. But, to save her life, Nita could not have been a companion in his games. Now Francesca, though no hoyden, was in the matter of games as good as a boy. She was not above climbing trees or running races, she excelled at rounders, she even initiated him into the mysteries of cricket, enlisting the services of Clare and the gardeners.

Then nothing would do but he must teach her to row, and many were the happy hours they spent on the sea together, sometimes with Clare in the stern, sometimes with little Sibyl and her nurse, sometimes with old Florestano, the fisherman, who would tell them quaint legends of saints, or mermaids, or ghosts, in all of which he believed equally. Sometimes they would go oyster-catching in Lake Fusaro, or, with Clare as a delightful third, would scramble about in the Acropolis at Cumæ, seeking to make fresh discoveries. Or they would play hide-and-seek in the Grotto della Pace, or act thrilling brigand stories, or dig and search in field or vineyard, and perhaps stumble across the remains of an old Roman villa or the ruins of a temple, hidden away by the straggling green growth.

Those were happy days for all of them. Carlo before long formed for Miss Claremont that sort of reverential, half-worshipping friendship and admiration which is not uncommon between boys of his age and middle-aged women. And Clare was a friend worth having. She influenced people chiefly by loving them; you never felt with her that she was trying to doctor you, or to improve your moral or spiritual health. She discussed many things with Carlo, listened to his crude, half-fledged ideas with the utmost patience, and would no more have smiled at them or treated them contemptuously than a

woman would smile with contempt as she watches the staggering steps of a baby beginning to walk alone.

Clare sympathised much with the difficulties of his position ; she saw that his deeply religious Italian nature would never rest content in its present isolation.

'Do you never feel the need of worshipping?' she asked him one day.

'Yes,' he replied, 'but one need not be within the walls of a church to do that ; a boat at sea, or an olive-grove, are more to my taste.'

Just at that time he was the least bit proud of having shaken himself free from all forms and ceremonies, a fact which was quite patent to Clare, and proved to her how perilous was his state.

'And yet,' she urged, 'I should have thought that you—a follower of Mazzini—would have had a strong faith in Association.'

The words struck home, unpleasantly convincing Carlo that he had been rapturously hugging a thing which he called Freedom, and that it was but an illusion more worthy to be called Isolation.

'I don't know where to turn to!' he exclaimed, chafed by a remark which had disturbed his peace, and proved it to be false.

'Are you trying to find out the best place?' she asked quietly.

He was silent, and Clare, who had the rare tact to know when she had said enough, changed the subject.

But the very next Sunday he astonished her by asking leave to join their party and drive in to the English church at Naples with them. His total absence of false shame, and the ingenuous humility which could thus tacitly own itself in the wrong, promptly and publicly following the suggestion of a woman, were thoroughly Italian. Clare reflected that an Englishman would have allowed a week or two to pass by, in order to prove that he came of his own free will and not at the instigation of another ; or would, perhaps, have toiled over on foot in the early morning, slinking in at the back of the church, in terror lest people should comment on the amendment of his ways.

After a time he formally joined the English Church. Of course he had some opposition to encounter ; but though his old friend the priest shook his head sorrowfully, and though his mother shed tears, and though the Ritters chafed him

good-humouredly, his happiness was too great to be marred by such things ; besides, they all loved him so well that they soon pardoned the obnoxious step which he had taken, and did their best to forget that he was not as they were.

A few months after this the first shadow fell upon Carlo's perfect felicity. It was suddenly arranged that the Britton household should migrate to England for a year. An aunt of Francesca's had just died, and some one was urgently needed to look after the motherless children. Who was so fit for such a task as Clare ? and though she would fain have lived on in that happy Italian home, she could not linger there when needed in another place, and at any rate she should have her children for yet another year. That helped to break the parting. Captain Britton was glad for a time to be with his brother, and a year of English life, in which to finish Francesca's rather unconventional education, was deemed a good idea by all. So once more Casa Bella was silent and deserted, and Carlo was left to his own devices.

It was just at this time that Nita returned from her convent. A great change was at once effected in the peacefulness of the Villa Bruno, for the girl, while retaining enough of her religious education to make her persecute her heretic brother with endless arguments and remonstrances, was yet so wearied of its strict restraint that she broke out into violent reaction and tyrannised over her mother, much as she herself had till now been tyrannised over.

The Signora Donati was an invalid ; she had never recovered from the cruel shock of her husband's death, nor had she at any time been noted for strength of character. Carlo had been too loyal ever to take advantage of this ; her slightest wish had been to him a command, and the two had idolised each other. But somehow it happened that Nita coming home from her convent felt like an intruder ; she could not find a niche for herself in the home, and, measuring the hearts of other people by her own, fancied she was not cared for. Perhaps her mother did show a little too markedly that Carlo was her favourite ; but then it really was difficult not to love the son who treated her with such tenderness, such respectful devotion, somewhat better than the daughter, who sought for nothing but her own amusement, and never voluntarily performed for her the slightest service.

It was also, perhaps, true that Carlo did not greatly care for his sister, at any rate she tried his temper severely. He was impatient with her aggravating little displays of piety, her

deep genuflexions, her paraded fasts. He was constantly detecting her in petty deceits, and once, after some worse specimens of duplicity than usual, he had angrily upbraided her.

'You are not fit to bear the name of Donati!' he cried hotly, his boyish sense of honour deeply wounded, and his family pride hurt to find that Nita was no better than the rest of the world.

'Perhaps I shall not bear it much longer!' she retorted, angrily.

And those words haunted poor Carlo for many a year. For, not long after, all Naples rang with the news that Anita Donati had eloped with her singing-master, a certain *basso* who had been engaged that winter at the San Carlo.

Fortunately, the Villa Bruno was far away in the country, and the Signora too great an invalid to go into society. She could bear her agony in solitude, and was not obliged to wear a mask and go about as though nothing had happened.

But Carlo was in the thick of the fray, he had to listen to Uncle Guido's indignant denunciations, he had to bear the brunt of the endless questions of the outsiders, had to endure the bitter consciousness that his sister's name was being bandied about in the city, and that, for the first time, a Donati had incurred well-merited blame.

Since then nothing had been heard of Anita, except that about a week after her flight she had forwarded to her mother a newspaper with the announcement of her marriage. But the Signora Donati never recovered from the shock, nor could she ever forgive herself, for she rightly felt that had her relations with her daughter been happier such a thing could never have happened.

Five years had gone by since then, and Time had passed his quieting hand over both grief and disgrace. Certainly Carlo felt nothing but happiness—unalloyed happiness—as he rode home from Naples that sunny spring day. He knew nothing of that ominous little paragraph torn out of the *Piccolo*, but galloped on over the white, dusty road, past fields of Indian corn, past olive-gardens and vineyards, through the long, dark grotto of Posilipo, and on towards the picturesque little southern town of Pozzuoli. He scarcely noticed all the beauty round him; he could see nothing but the face of his dreams; and the very horse-hoofs flying over the road seemed to repeat, again and again, the word, 'Francesca! Francesca! Francesca!'



## CHAPTER III

## FRANCESCA

'Mortal ! if life smile on thee, and thou find  
 All to thy mind,  
 Think, Who did once from Heaven to Hell descend  
 Thee to befriend ;  
 So shalt thou dare forego, at His dear call,  
 Thy best, thine all.'—KEBLE.

WHILE Carlo rode back from Naples, and while Signor Merlino and his operatic company steamed between the Pillars of Hercules into the blue Mediterranean, Francesca Britton sat in a little stone belvedere in the garden of Casa Bella, from time to time raising her eyes from her needlework to glance at that same blue Mediterranean, or at the lovely mountains in Ischia, which were plainly visible through the arched doorway.

Beautiful as a child, Francesca was more than beautiful in early womanhood—she was lovely. It was not alone that the outline of cheeks and chin was perfect, that the nose was finely chiselled, that the masses of dark hair drawn back from the white forehead were rich and wavy ; all this might be set down in black and white without conveying the faintest idea of what she was. And in truth this had happened over and over again ; the photographers had done what they could, but had failed grievously. Photography could not give the ineffable charm of her ever-varying expression, the depth and sweetness of her dark-grey eyes, the dimple in her cheek, which seemed indeed the sign and symbol of her sunshiny nature. It could not convey the least notion of her shy grace, of her delicate purity, or of that keen sense of humour which sparkled so deliciously in her home-life. Outsiders sometimes deemed the beautiful English girl cold and distant, and a country life had tended to increase her natural shyness ; but even had she lived in the midst of the fashionable world, Francesca Britton never could have been thoroughly known out of her own circle,—she was one of those who keep their best for their own.

She was roused from a reverie by seeing a little miniature of herself flying down the straight, sunny walk which led to the summer-house, bordered on either side by azaleas glowing with crimson blossom, and tall, white oleanders.

'Dino sent me,' panted the little girl,—'Dino sent me with

this for father. Where is father? They thought he was out here. And only fancy! Dino says, Fran dear, that Carlo came and rang the bell just like a visitor, and handed in his card. Think of Carlo ringing the bell!’

And Sibyl broke into a peal of laughter as she skipped about the summer-house. Her sister let her needlework fall, and taking the card, glanced at it, smiling and blushing in a way that would have enraptured any one but unobservant Sibyl.

‘Dino, he is nodding, and smiling, and looking so funny!’ continued the little girl; ‘and he says Carlo has perhaps come a-courting, but he won’t tell me what it means. What is courting, Fran? Anything to do with the new tennis-court?’

‘Tis a game which you play for love, Sibyl dear. There, run and take the card to father, he is down in the orange-grove.’

The little messenger flew off again on her errand, and Francesca sat musing, smiling to herself every now and then as she thought of the beloved name with its novel prefix. Carlo an ‘Avvocato;’ it was too funny! And how like him to send in his card and be shown into the drawing-room so ceremoniously, instead of, as usual, just leaping over the hedge of prickly pear which divided the gardens of Casa Bella and Villa Bruno. Then delicious tremors, that were neither hope nor fear, ran through her, and her heart beat fast and loud. She could bear the stillness no longer, and, rising, she left the summer-house and walked down the path between the oleanders and the azaleas. All at once quick footsteps fell upon her ear; then, through the trees, she caught sight of the lithe, graceful figure so familiar to her. Ah! how foolish she was. Had they not been the best of friends for years and years? Why could she not go and meet him naturally to-day? Scolding herself roundly, she stopped because her feet refused to advance another step, and, with fingers which trembled visibly, tried to break off a spray of the crimson flowers.

‘It is too stiff for you!’ exclaimed Carlo, turning the corner and hurrying towards her.

‘No, no!’ she protested, laughing; ‘you always misdoubt my powers!’ and putting force upon her unruly fingers she broke off the spray. ‘Here is a buttonhole for the “Avvocato,” with his friend’s congratulations.’

‘The “Avvocato” is not content, he craves something more,’ said Carlo, smiling.

‘Very well; old playmates must not stand on ceremony,’

she said gaily, well pleased that she had regained her self-possession; 'come to the belvedere, and I will put some maidenhair with it.'

They walked together up the path, Francesca pausing to pluck two or three pieces from a jungle of maidenhair growing about the old stones.

'There!' she exclaimed as they sat down in the cool little arbour while she twisted the ferns among the flowers; 'now are you content?'

'Not quite,' he said; 'I am clumsy, you will put them in for me.'

She fastened the flowers in his coat, and again her tiresome fingers began to tremble. Carlo, blessing the sight, snatched her hand in his and kissed it passionately.

'Francesca, forgive me!' he cried, 'I could wait no longer; you will not grudge me that one kiss. My darling, my darling, I have waited such years for you!'

His face, glowing with love, and devotion, and eager hope, was raised to hers. She only saw it for a moment, for something made a mist rise before her eyes, and when she could see clearly again she did not dare to meet his gaze; she looked instead out at the blue Mediterranean.

'I have loved you, Francesca, since you came back from England,—since you came and brought light and happiness to us after that dark time. I told your father,—begged him to let me speak to you, and he bade me wait. I have waited nearly five years, Francesca, and, oh! at times I scarcely knew how to trust myself here. Again and again I almost broke my word; but now your father gives me leave to come to you, to confess my love. My darling, look at me,—speak to me!'

She turned and gazed right into his eager, wistful eyes, a long, sweet, steadfast look; then her lips began to quiver a little, but thought better of it and smiled instead.

'What do you want me to say?'

'Say,' he cried eagerly, 'say, "I will try to love you."''

She shook her head.

'I can never say that,' she replied, and once more looked out seawards.

But the vehemence, the fire of his Italian nature, half frightened her. Despair was written on his face, despair rang in his voice, he did not pause one moment to reflect.

'Francesca! Francesca!' he cried, 'don't tell me I have come too late. My love! my love! I can't live without you. Unsay that "never."''

Grieved beyond measure that words so playfully meant should have called forth such a tropical outburst, she wreathed her arms about his neck, and pressed her face to his.

'Carlo *mio*,' she sobbed, 'don't break my heart by misunderstanding me; I can never try to love you—because—because—I love you already.'

The depth of love and tenderness in her voice, the sweet abandonment of her manner—more really maidenly in its perfect sincerity than any coyness or hesitation—all this heightened to bliss Carlo's rapture of love. The momentary mistake, the cloud-shadow that had threatened his sky, made the sunshine all the more exquisite. He could not speak a word, but only clasped her close in the long sweet embrace which symbolised their betrothal.

'My own!' he murmured at last. 'My own, you gave me one terrible minute. To be without you, Francesca, that would be to be crucified!'

He did not definitely think of the talk between the two Englishmen, but the thought suggested that afternoon had sunk deep into his mind, and the agony of the brief mistake gave the emphatic utterance of that last word a tenfold power. Francesca breathed fast; Love unfolded to her his wonderful face, hitherto veiled; she was awed by the thought of the immortal passion, the undying devotion of her lover. The strength and sacredness of that last word he had used, filled her heart with a wondering love and humility. His happiness, his life, was in her keeping. And hers in his. Mortal man could never bear the strain of the one thought without the support of the other.

After a while they began to weave golden visions of the future; Carlo suggesting one place and another, for which he thought she had a fancy; a certain ideal nook, called Quisisana, on the other side of Naples, where once, years before, she had said she would like to build a house if some one would but leave her a fortune; a pretty villa at Posilipo, which she used to admire. It touched her to see how he remembered all her careless, girlish speeches, and had treasured them up for years.

'Ah,' she said, smiling, 'I used to think place would make such a difference; but now, Carlo *mio*, I don't care one bit. We will make a home in the wilderness, if it so pleases you, or at Naples, in a corner of an old palace—'tis all one to me so long as we are together.'

He drew her yet closer to him. They went on weaving

their plans unconscious of a small sprite approaching the summer-house. Sibyl stood composedly in the doorway for a moment, quite unnoticed by the lovers.

'Oh!' she ejaculated at length, 'is that the game?'

Her perplexed and rather disappointed look was most comical.

'What game?' asked Francesca, laughing and blushing.

'The game you said people played for love.'

'Yes, this is it,' said Carlo, laughing immoderately.

'Is that all?' exclaimed the sprite, in a tone of deep disappointment.

They only laughed.

'Well, for my part,' said Sibyl, who had caught many old-fashioned little phrases from living always with grown-up people, 'for my part, I think it's very dull.'

She ran off. Carlo watched her out of sight, smiling at her quaint disapproval.

'She will miss you, poor little one,' he said at last.

'Yes, that would be one reason for not going far away. And your mother, Carlo! How selfish of me not to remember her! You must never be parted from her—never.'

'You will be to her in the place of Nita,' said Carlo. 'You will comfort her as I have never been able to do.'

And so once again they plunged into the golden glories of the future. Clare must be persuaded to come back again, and take Sibyl in charge, and their paradise should be the Villa Bruno, already dear to them through many associations. That plan would obviate all difficulties, and render partings unnecessary; would be the happiest plan for others as well as for themselves.

'And we must not be selfish in our happiness,' said Francesca.

'No,' he replied, smiling as he remembered his friend's parting words, 'we will prove to Enrico Ritter that love is not selfishness, and that egoism does not rule the world, as he thinks.'

A gong sounding within the house warned Carlo that he ought to go. Together they left the little stone summer-house and wandered through the lovely garden,—a garden wholly un-English. The scorching sun would not admit of lawns, but nevertheless there was a great charm in the straight shady walks, with here and there an umbrella-pine, or a tall and sombre cypress mingling with limes, chestnuts, and camphor-trees. A long colonnade of white pillars was festooned

from end to end with honeysuckle; vines linked together the bushy mulberry-trees; Indian corn grew green and ribbon-like beneath; while about all was that delicious sweetness only to be met with in the gardens of Italy. The house was solid and unpretentious, its whiteness relieved by masses of the feathery green pepper-tree, and a glory of climbing red geranium. Captain Britton sat in the loggia, which was wreathed with white roses. He looked up smiling as he saw the two drawing near, then came forward to bestow a kiss upon his daughter and a hearty hand-shake upon his future son-in-law. He was a large-limbed, strong-looking man, somewhat heavily built, with scanty grey hair and whiskers, and a broad smiling mouth. In manner he was kindly, genial, and patronising. But, spite of some surface faults, he was a thoroughly good-hearted man, and there was no mistaking his genuine hospitality and anxiety to help his friends. If Carlo occasionally winced beneath his benign patronage, or was provoked to anger by some show of insular prejudice, such trifles were soon forgotten in the recollection of the thousand acts of kindness shown both to his mother and to himself by the neighbourly Englishman. And then the Donati were proverbially susceptible, and Carlo had long been on his guard, and had schooled himself into thinking that the small discords and jarring notes which now and then occurred in the intercourse with the Brittons were really owing to his own ultra-sensitiveness. Such things were, after all, but trifles light as air, and were powerless really to disturb the bliss of being near his love.

'Hearty congratulations,' said the old Captain, warmly. 'I had not much fear that my little Fran would be unkind to you, and I suppose I must not grumble at losing her. I little thought that some day she would be changing into a Signora. But, there, we have made half an Englishman of you already; have we not?'

'No, no,' said Francesca, quick to note that the last words brought a momentary gleam of anger into her lover's eyes. 'Carlo will always be true to his country, though he speaks English almost like a native. That is because I taught you, Carlo *mio*; is it not?'

'Without love of the teacher learning is drudgery,' said Carlo, laughing. 'I enjoyed my English lessons.'

'That reminds me of your old master, Signor Piale. Oh, what will he say to us, Carlo? What will he say?' and Francesca laughed merrily.

'My kind regards to Signora Donati,' said Captain Britton,

smiling. 'And if I may be permitted to call and pay my respects——'

'To-night,' interrupted Carlo, eagerly. 'Say you will come to-night, after dinner. My mother cannot leave the house, you know, and she will be longing to see Francesca.'

'Well, well, no need to stand on ceremony even to-day; we are such old friends, are we not?' said the Captain, good-naturedly. 'After dinner, then—after dinner. Come, Fran, my dear, no need to see Carlo off the premises, you'll meet again before long, and the soup is getting cold.'

Francesca was borne off to the dining-room, and Carlo, turning away, cleared the prickly pears at a bound, and alighted amid a group of lemon-trees in his own garden.

## CHAPTER IV

### A CLOUDLESS BETROTHAL

'Let my voice be heard that asketh  
Not for fame and not for glory;  
Give for all our life's dear story,  
Give us Love and give us Peace!'

JEAN INGELOW.

VILLA BRUNO was a smaller house than Casa Bella. It was lacking, too, in the air of cozy English comfort which the Brittons had managed to impart to their rooms, and the furniture was scanty, though handsome of its kind. Carlo walked through the verandah and entered by the open window of the *salotto*, treading lightly, as he saw that his mother lay asleep on her couch. He stole up to her, and stood in silence, watching the beautiful but worn face of the invalid. He thought how great a happiness was in store for her, and smiled. He imagined Francesca bringing that English air of home into this room, and thought how sweet it would be when he rode home each evening to picture those two together waiting for him. Looking on into the sunny future, he forgot the present; his mother had opened her eyes, and had watched him for some moments before he saw that she was awake.

At last he looked down at her, and met her eyes shining into his with perfect comprehension.

'Carlino, you bring me good news!' she exclaimed, drawing his face down to hers, and kissing the smooth, ruddy-brown cheek.

'The best news, mother—the best!' he replied, returning her embrace. 'Oh, mother! I'm the happiest man in Italy.'

'Francesca——' began the Signora.

'Francesca is mine—is mine!' he broke in. 'She is coming—you will see her soon, *madre mia*.'

'And her father?'

'Was kindness itself. He will bring her in this evening to see you. No one could have been more friendly. I saw him first, and then—then he told me I might speak to her—that I should find her in the garden. Afterwards, her first thought was for you. Oh, mother, she will be to you the daughter you have so much needed.'

The tears started to the mother's eyes.

'*Insomma!* Now I have grieved you, and made you think of poor Nita; happiness made me forget all else. Forgive me, little mother; I did not mean to make you think of the past.'

'Ah!' sobbed the Signora Donati. 'How can I help thinking of it, Carlino, when the contrast is so sharp—you coming to me thus with your joy as a son should, and Nita bringing me only shame and grief and disgrace—not even sending me one line of love or regret all these years?'

'She will come back, little mother,—she will come back,' he said, soothingly. 'Some day she will feel her need of you. Don't cry to-night, of all nights in the year. I shall take it as a bad omen.'

Years had raised no barrier between these two; Carlo was as frank and open with his mother as when he had been a child; she had shared all his hopes and fears during his long time of probation, and now she shared his joy, and was soon coaxed back to cheerfulness, as he told her more of what had passed at the Casa Bella. She was quite herself again as she went in to dinner upon his arm, her grief was forgotten, she laughed merrily at his account of Enrico's philosophical counsels, and felt a glow of pride and happiness as she looked across the table at the son who had been all in all to her for so many years. Carlo was too happy to be hungry, but he pledged his mother over a bottle of Orvieto, and they drank Francesca's health, and clinked glasses, and made merry.

The *tête-à-tête* dinner at the Casa Bella was quieter, but



happy, too, in its way. The old Captain beamed silently from behind the sirloin. Francesca looked radiant. They talked fitfully of the weather, of the orange-crop, of the silkworms, of the last letter from England—of everything, in fact, except the one subject that was nearest their hearts; but, then, old Dino was waiting, and it behoved them to keep up appearances. Their tongues were unloosed by the appearance of Sibyl and the dessert, and the disappearance of the servant.

‘Sibyl,’ said the Captain, taking the little girl on his knee, ‘what would you think if we were to have a wedding here?’

‘A wedding, father?’ Sibyl clapped her hands with delight. ‘Oh, may I be the bride, father? May I be the bride?’

‘No,’ said the father, laughing, ‘that character is bespoken. You will have to be my little housekeeper. Francesca is to be the bride. There, you must drink her health: Long life and happiness to the future Signora Donati.’

Sibyl obediently repeated the words, but made a wry face over the claret.

‘What horrid stuff, Daddy; do give me a bit of your orange, quick.’ Then, with her mouth very full, ‘But Fran can’t be Signora Donati.’

‘Oh, yes, she can when she marries Carlo,’ said the Captain.

‘Marries Carlo!’ echoed Sibyl, in astonishment. ‘Dear me, will Carlo be married? What a bother! I suppose he’ll never play games and be jolly any more?’

‘Why not?’ said Francesca, laughing.

‘Oh, he won’t,’ said Sibyl, looking wise and elderly, ‘I know he won’t; I asked nurse the other day what it meant to be married, and she said it was when people grew steady and settled down.’

The two elders laughed heartily.

‘But he will be your brother, you know, Sibyl, and brothers always play,’ said Francesca.

‘Carlo my brother?’

‘Your brother-in-law.’

‘Oh, yes, I know about that—that’s what he had put on his cards,’ said Sibyl, triumphantly; ‘so he must have known he was going to be my brother before he came here; Dino said that long word was in-law.’

Then before Captain Britton had done laughing, Sibyl convulsed her companions by solemnly raising the glass to her lips again, and repeating in the gravest way imaginable,—

‘Long life and many games to my future brother—in-law.’

Francesca was eager to go in quickly to see Signora Donati, but she had to wait till Sibyl was tucked up in bed and her father had finished his after-dinner nap. Then she threw a white, woolly shawl about her head and shoulders, slipped her arm into the Captain’s, and crossed over to the Villa Bruno. The Signora was alone; she came forward to meet them with the prettiest little greeting imaginable. Francesca loved her dearly, and returned her embraces with all possible warmth; but above the soft and tender assurances of the Signora’s delight in the news which Carlo had brought her, she was conscious of her lover’s voice singing out in the garden. The joyous ring about the old Neapolitan song, the unmistakable rapture of the singer, filled her heart with happiness. The sweet, familiar air always brought back to her memory that first perfect evening at the Villa Bruno.

‘He has done nothing but sing since he came back from you,’ said the Signora, as the singer drew nearer, every word distinctly heard in that clear atmosphere—

*‘O dolce Napoli,  
O suol beato  
Dove sorridere.  
Volle il creato,  
Tu sei l’impero  
Dell’armonia,  
Santa Lucia! Santa Lucia!’*

The last note still echoed in the air as Carlo stepped into the dimly-lighted room through the open window, bearing in his hand a bunch of red roses and myrtle-blossom. It was the picture he had so often imagined which met his gaze, for Francesca stood beside his mother, the lamplight shedding a soft glow over her sweet, fair face. She was dressed in some kind of soft, white dress which made him think of a baby’s robe, her wavy brown hair was a little ruffled by the white shawl which she had thrown aside; in her sweet, pure happiness she was exquisite.

‘I did not know you had come,’ he exclaimed, hastening towards her; ‘how was it I never heard you?’

‘We came without ceremony, there was no ringing of bells,’ said Francesca.

‘And Carlo was singing at the top of his voice,’ said the mother, laughing. ‘I foresee, Francesca, that he will now be like my canary, who is so happy that he sings all day long, and I have sometimes to extinguish him.’

'We have been wondering what Signor Piale will say,' replied Francesca, smiling; 'you know he looks upon love as the supreme obstacle in the way of art.'

'Then he should not compose music to such words as these,' said Carlo, taking up a song from the open piano.

'Is that his last? I have not heard it,' said Francesca. 'Ah, he has dedicated it to me as he promised.'

'Go and sing it, Carlo; it suits you well,' said his mother.

'I am not well acquainted with your Tennyson,' she continued, turning to Captain Britton, 'but it seems to me that these words are melodious and well adapted for music.'

The Captain was not poetical, but he at once launched into an account of how he had once met the Laureate at Lord Blamton's, while Carlo and Francesca wandered off to the piano, Francesca glancing through the accompaniment to see if she could manage it.

Even in that land of beautiful voices Carlo Donati's voice was most remarkable. But Piale was the only person who quite knew what it was worth, and he had issued strict orders that his pupil was to sing nowhere save at home and at his lessons. He knew well enough that if Carlo once sang at a Neapolitan party he would be allowed no peace, but would become the spoilt and overworked amateur, and fail altogether to do justice to the severe but excellent training which he had now almost completed. The voice was a baritone of unusual power and sweetness; Piale's music suited the pathetic words admirably:

'Love is come with a song and a smile,  
Welcome love with a smile and a song;  
Love can stay but a little while.  
Why cannot he stay? They call him away;  
Ye do him wrong, ye do him wrong;  
Love will stay for a whole life long.'

The song ended, Francesca sat dreamily playing over the refrain which her lover had declaimed so passionately; he stood close to her, deftly arranging the flowers he had brought from the garden in her hair and dress. Then, after the thanks and praises of the listeners had been spoken, Captain Britton once more enlarged upon his meeting with the Laureate, and Carlo, foreseeing that the topic would last some time, looked longingly out into the dusky garden, then down at Francesca.

'The paths are quite dry, it is starlight,' he said; 'will you not come out?'

She smiled and nodded, let him wrap the white shawl about

her, and crossed the room to the window. Carlo lingered a moment to slip a cluster of red roses into his mother's hand.

'We go into the garden for a few minutes, *madre mia*,' he explained.

She smiled approvingly, perceiving that he meant to claim all the liberty which an English betrothal permits, and then turned again to the Captain with a question, in her pretty broken English, which she was well aware would keep him happy for some time to come.

'And this Lord Blanton, at whose house it occurred, is he your friend?'

The lovers, supremely indifferent to both Lords and Laureates, strolled out into the starlit garden. All was still and peaceful; through the olives they could catch glimpses of the yellow lights in Pozzuoli, and every now and then a lurid crimson flame and a column of vapour lit up by the fierce glare, revealed in the distance the conical form of Vesuvius and its peaceful neighbour, Somma. There was a delicious fragrance in the air; thyme, and myrtle, and mignonette filled the dewy garden with their sweetness; everywhere the peace of a great content seemed to brood. A stranger might have fancied something disturbing and incongruous in the burning mountain; but, to Carlo, Vesuvius was an old friend, not a terror. In his childhood he had fancied it a sort of symbol of the Deity, vaguely connecting it with that other pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night of which old Father Cristoforo had told him. Not a care, not the least shadow of anxiety, broke the bliss—the unclouded happiness of that evening.

Remembering Enrico's advice to keep his happiness to himself, Carlo took a holiday, and stayed at home till the end of the week, when, partly prompted by a conscientious wish to break the news to Piale, and to keep his usual appointment with the old Maestro on Saturday morning, partly because he wished to search for a betrothal ring to his mind, he ordered his horse and rode in to Naples.

Piale lived over a shop in the Strada Mont' Oliveto. His apartments were furnished in a Spartan manner, without the least attempt at comfort or picturesqueness. A marble floor, unrelieved by carpet or mat, walls painted in pale green, but bare of a single picture, a grand piano in the middle of the room, a table strewn with music-paper, books, and pens, and a few straight-backed chairs stiffly set round it, completed the furniture of this musical anchorite. When Carlo entered the room that morning he found the old man poring over the score

of some opera, his shaggy grey hair tossed back from his broad forehead, and the shabbiness of his many-coloured dressing-gown fully revealed by the sunshine which streamed in through the half-open *jalousies*. He looked up as Carlo entered, giving him a sharp, searching glance, as though to discover how the world went with him that morning. Convinced by the radiant happiness of his pupil's face that at present the sky was cloudless, he grunted out a rather surly '*Buon giorno*,' and closed his book with an air of reluctance.

'I want your congratulations, Maestro,' said Carlo, coming quickly forward. 'Nothing but the most filial obedience and respect to yourself brought me away from my paradise this morning. You must mingle with praise your good wishes for our health and happiness.'

'Hein!' exclaimed the old man, pretending not to catch his meaning. 'You are an *avvocato*, I understand; young Ritter told me as much as that. *Corpo di Bacco!* don't come to me for congratulations. You've mistaken your profession. You are wasting—yes, wasting, the noblest gift of God.'

'But, Maestro, reflect; how is it possible for me to use my voice as you would have me? Would you wish me to leave my mother? And then, moreover, there are other considerations—I am about to be married.'

'Married!' The Maestro turned away with a groan. 'Ah, then I wash my hands of you! You are lost to art—lost to the noblest of the professions! Farewell to my hopes! All my efforts with you are thrown away! You might have been the pride of my old age and the delight of Europe. Instead you choose the career of a lawyer and the caresses of a woman.'

'You speak scornfully, Maestro,' replied the culprit, laughing. 'I shall add two adjectives to your bald remark—"the useful career" and "a perfect woman." Why, signore, you who know Miss Britton should be ready to make excuse for me. What else could you expect? Is the Muse of Harmony to take precedence of such an one?'

'Hear him!' cried Piale, in despair; 'great Heaven! and it is this ungrateful one that thou hast endowed with the voice of a seraph and the dramatic power of a Salvini!'

'My apologies to Salvini,' said Carlo, laughing merrily, 'but that, beloved Maestro, is bathos—a fine example.'

His laughter was so infectious that Piale was obliged to join in it, then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he shuffled across to the piano.

'You are incorrigible! I wash my hands of you! But

since you are in so jocular a mood at the prospect of settling down to so monotonous a life——'

'Maestro!' broke in Carlo, with indignation.

'Do I speak unadvisedly?' said Piale, with sarcasm; 'not at all. Oh, I know well enough what it will be. You will sit under your vine and under your fig-tree, and you will count the olive branches round your table——'

'Signor Piale!'

'And you will say as you look, "I must work hard," and you will become the speaking-machine of the Neapolitan criminals, and you will use that divine gift for the proclamation of lies, and you will debase your fine dramatic genius and make it the tool of the worthless and the guilty. Since all this makes you in so gay a humour, come sing me your song from *Il Barbiere*.'

Pursing up his lips the old professor began to play the accompaniment of *Largo al Factotum*; and Carlo, entering into the spirit of the thing, and with his sense of humour touched by the analogy between the barber's glorification of his profession and the words that had just passed, sang magnificently.

At the end there was unbroken silence. The old professor sat lost in thought, Carlo watched him with a smile on his lips. Then, sauntering across the room, sang, *sotto voce*, the recitative which followed, throwing malicious meaning into the

'Ah! Che bella vita! Oh! Che mestiere!'

'It could not have been better sung!' cried Piale, with a gesture of despair. 'Carlo, perhaps I have dealt unfairly by you. I have never praised you, never told you what I thought of your powers; I feared to ruin that modesty which has endeared you to me! But now it is time that you seriously consider the matter. There, there, don't interrupt me! Marry if you will, and let your wife tend the Signora Donati in your absence. But do not allow so glorious a gift to rust unused.'

'But, dear Maestro,' said Carlo, gravely, 'you do not realise that others do not think of the profession as you do. Captain Britton regards the theatre as the school for hell, the stage is an abomination to him. He fancies that all actors are like that villain Merlino. And, indeed, it is wonderful that he made no objection to having as son-in-law one who is so deeply compromised as I am. I suppose he hardly realised the fact, he has almost forgotten poor Nita's existence.'

At the recollection of that sorrowful past he sighed. Piale

was quick to note how the remembrance interfered with his present happiness.

'Well, only a brute would dream of holding you responsible for the sins of others,' he said, warmly.

'Tell me,' said Carlo, 'have you seen any mention of my sister lately in any of the musical papers?'

'I heard that Merlino's company had been in America for the last two years, and that Madame Merlino had made a good impression there. . . . Well, I suppose I must say no more, lad, but it is hard on a master to have his best pupil lost to the world.'

He changed the subject rather hastily. He could not bear to bring back that cloud to Carlo's brow by telling him the last news of his sister.

His lesson over, Carlo began to ransack the jewellers' shops, and having at last found a broad gold gipsy ring with a single diamond which satisfied him, he bent his steps towards his uncle's house, conscious that Guido Donati—a rather autocratic man—would require early notice of his nephew's engagement.

The interview passed off well. Uncle Guido thoroughly approved of the marriage, and treated his nephew in the most generous and paternal way, and Carlo came forth in excellent spirits. All seemed to promise well for his future life. Happy in his love, with the prospect of a fair inheritance, a hope which practically amounted to certainty of success in his profession, and with the best of mothers and the truest of friends, it seemed as if life could offer him nothing more. His face was radiant as he greeted Enrico Ritter.

'Well met!' he exclaimed, waylaying Enrico, who, in a fit of abstraction, would have passed him by.

'Oh, it is you!' exclaimed Enrico, looking him critically in the face. 'Well, what news?'

'You will be requested to dance at my wedding before long,' said Carlo, gaily.

'So!' Enrico whistled.

'I took your advice, you see, *amico mio*, and stayed at home, that you might not be afflicted with the trouble of congratulating me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Enrico, with a sarcastic smile. 'That is your kind way of putting it—egoist that you are! You stayed to enjoy yourself, and now you want to make me believe that you were considering my comfort and not your own. An egoist! A double-dyed egoist!'

But his laughter was suddenly checked. They were passing

a hoarding in the Strada S. Trinità, Carlo had glanced at one of the placards, and now he clutched his friend's arm.

'Enrico!' he gasped; 'my sister's name—I thought I saw it. Look for me; I can't.'

Huge black letters on a pink ground danced in wild confusion before his eyes; but surely it was that hateful name of Merlino which had suddenly darkened his sky, which had struck a blow at his heart and left him stunned and bewildered!

'Dear old fellow, you must come on,' said Enrico. 'I didn't know those cursed placards would be out yet; but it is true, alas! only too true.'

Carlo walked on mechanically, feeling as though he were in a nightmare. His thoughts flew wildly from Francesca to Anita, from his mother to Captain Britton, from his uncle to Merlino. He had no definite ideas, only a giddy consciousness that the world, so bright but a minute before, was now overshadowed, and that a nameless fear filled his heart.

'Where?' he faltered, after a brief silence.

'The Mercadante,' said Enrico, following his train of thought and understanding the laconic question as a friend should.

'Let us come there,' said Carlo.

Enrico silently complied. After a time his friend looked up with another question,—

'You knew of this before, then?'

Enrico signed an assent.

'The day I last saw you,' he added, after a pause.

'What? That thing you tore out of the *Piccolo*? Why did you try to keep it from me?'

'I wanted you to have a cloudless betrothal,' said Enrico, rather reluctantly.

'Ah, *amico mio*!' exclaimed the other, gratefully. 'You shield me thus, and then call yourself egoist!'

'Of course,' said Enrico, who hated to be caught in a kindly action. 'It was pure egoism. Naturally, I wish you to be happy, for it disturbs me and makes me uncomfortable to see you as you are now. Purely for my own sake I deferred the evil day.'

Carlo could not help smiling, even then, at the energy with which his friend tried to establish his own selfishness for the sake of triumphing in his pet theory.

'I must find out whether they are yet in Naples,' he said, growing grave once more, and trying hard to collect his thoughts. 'Oh, Enrico, how shall I break the news to my mother? She is unfit to bear the least shock.'



'I would keep it from her, then—at any rate, till you know what line your sister intends to take,' said Enrico. 'But, see, we are close to the Mercadante. Shall I make inquiries for you?'

'I wish you would,' said Carlo, with a look of relief. 'Ask when the Company arrives in Naples, and where they are to be found.'

Enrico walked forward, Carlo following more slowly; on past two open-air *caffès*, with groups of idlers beneath a shady trellis-work of vine and euonymus; on past a stall gaily wreathed with lemons and greenery, where thirsty Neapolitans were drinking mineral water; on till the arsenal was in sight, and the red tower of the lighthouse, while in the foreground was the Teatro Mercadante. Little had he thought that the sight of its pink walls with their white facings would ever have caused him such strange emotion. Huge placards were posted here in all directions. He read them over and over in a sort of dream, taking in little but that one name in larger type, 'MME. MERLINO.' At length, Enrico came forth, having made his inquiries.

'They do not seem to know the exact date of their arrival,' he said, in answer to Carlo's mute question. 'The man was just going off to his *siesta*, and was not best pleased at being hindered. However, he wrote down the address for me. You will find them there, whenever they do arrive. It may be to-morrow or any day next week. They are coming from America, but by what route the fellow didn't know. However, you see by the placards there are no performances for another ten days.'

Carlo took the paper, and read the address.

'I shall be here again to-morrow,' he said. 'I will call and see if they have arrived, and till then I shall say nothing to my mother.'

'That would be wise,' said Enrico. 'Then she will be spared the worry and uncertainty. You look tired, *amico mio*. Come home with me, and have your *siesta* in peace.'

'No,' said Carlo; 'I want to go home. I want to tell Francesca.'

'You can't ride back in this heat; you'll get a sunstroke.'

But he only shook his head, and, with an unmistakable air of wishing to be alone, said good-bye to his friend, and went to order his horse.

Enrico turned to look after him. Profound dejection was expressed in his walk. The serpent had all too soon invaded his paradise.

## CHAPTER V

## A THREATENING SKY

'Come, all ye faithful, come, and dare to prove  
The bitter sweet, the pain and bliss of love.'

TRENCH.

FRANCESCA came down one of the shady garden paths to meet her lover; she held in her hand a forked branch, on which, nestled among the pale green leaves, grew four fresh-looking lemons. For a moment Carlo forgot everything in the bliss of seeing her again. It seemed to him that they had been ages apart; that he had been toiling across a barren desert to reach this cool green retreat, in which his betrothed reigned supreme. How beautiful she looked in that familiar, soft, white dress, and with her white forehead and delicate colouring shaded by a large hat! The hat was one of those shallow white ones which can sometimes be bought for two or three *soldi*; it was not calculated, however, to sustain the embraces of a lover, and it speedily fell back, leaving Francesca with her wavy brown hair uncovered. For a minute, Carlo held her from him, that he might the better see her, with a datura-tree for background, and the soft, creamy flowers drooping over her head. Francesca, having known him and loved him for years, saw in one glance that he was in trouble.

'You are tired, my own,' she said. 'It was too hot for you to ride back so early; you should have taken your *siesta* at Naples.'

'I couldn't rest,' he said, with a sigh. 'I wanted to get back to you.'

'Something has grieved you. Does Uncle Guido disapprove of our betrothal?'

'No, oh no. How could he do that? He treated me as though I had been his son.'

'Yet something or some one has been troubling you. But we will not talk of it now; you shall rest first. Come into the Rose-room; it will be cool there, and the sun is not off the summer-house yet.'

They went together towards the house. The Rose-room was Francesca's own little sitting-room. It had a ceiling painted after the Italian fashion with wreaths of pink roses; it had cool grey walls crowded with a most miscellaneous collec-

tion of photographs and water-colour sketches; it had rose-coloured curtains in figured muslin; and, after the manner of rooms, it betrayed its owner's chief failing—it was in wild disorder. Francesca was by no means immaculate; like other girls, she had her faults, and untidiness was one of them.

'Try my rocking-chair,' she said, removing a guitar which reposed upon the cushions, and trying to find a home for it upon the crowded table. 'I will be back directly.'

Carlo, rescuing the guitar, which was in imminent danger of falling, lay back in the easy-chair, and waited, letting his hand wander idly about among the strings. It was sweet to feel already so entirely at home at Casa Bella—its very confusion was dear to him. Presently Francesca returned, bearing a big tumbler of St. Galmier, which she set down upon Dante's *Paradiso*, while she selected the finest of the lemons from her branch.

'Lend me your knife, Carlino,' she said; 'I've lost mine, as usual. There!' as she cut open the cool, ripe fruit; 'isn't that a beauty? How much, I wonder, for this glassful? I should think half. Ah, how like me! I've forgotten the sugar.' Then, running to the door, 'Sibyl! Sibyl!'

The little sister came flying down the passage.

'Run and fetch me some sugar, will you, Sibyl dear? Oh, bother! Now, what have I done with the store-room key? Look, darling, I think it must be on my dressing-table, or, perhaps, in the pocket of my blue gown; or, if not, in my work-basket.'

Sibyl ran away to hunt for the missing key, and Francesca searched among the contents of the table to see if by chance it had been left there.

'Ah, Carlo *mio*!' she said, with a pretty penitence, 'I fear I am not, as the ladies say who advertise in the newspapers, "thoroughly domesticated." I shall have to mend my evil ways now.'

Carlo pretended not to understand what 'domesticated' meant, and they had much merriment over a dictionary, which declared that it was to be 'tame' and not 'foreign.'

Sibyl at last returned with the sugar-basin, claiming one lump as wages and accepting another to run away. Then Francesca began to stir the contents of the tumbler with an ivory paper-knife, since spoons were not handy; and in much laughter and lover-like teasing Carlo forgot all about the cloud-shadow which had arisen.

The ring fitted to perfection, and Francesca's delight was

pretty to see; she was not above a womanly weakness for jewellery, and frankly owned that she always had longed for just one diamond.

‘And what about the old Maestro?’ she exclaimed at last. ‘You never told me how he bore the news.’

‘Well, dear old Piale was, or pretended to be, a good deal depressed. It seems that he really had set his heart on my going on the stage, and had not at all realised how impossible that would be.’

‘Yet you do not feel as my father does about theatre-going!’ said Francesca. ‘And Clare! Don’t you remember what arguments we used to have with dear Clare about it?’

‘Yes, she was dead against it; but then she was brought up in a Puritan family, and the old prejudices lingered with her. For me, I have no feeling whatever of that sort, but nevertheless the life of an operatic singer is quite the last I should willingly choose. Piale talks scoffingly of the humdrum life of an advocate; but for my part I shall be very well content to stay at home, with the hope of some day following in my father’s steps and doing a little for my country. Think of the wretchedness of a wandering life! It’s all very well to talk about delighting Europe—practically one would be little better than an exile—and into the bargain Piale owns that art requires the sacrifice of domestic life.’

‘I knew he would not approve of me,’ said Francesca, laughing. ‘We must have him to our wedding, Carlo, and he shall make a speech. What fun he will be!’

Just for a minute, as they talked of theatrical life, Carlo’s thoughts had reverted to Nita, but Francesca’s reference to the wedding soon dispersed the cloud. He had most markedly the Italian faculty of living wholly in the present, and enjoying it much as a child enjoys life. They lingered long in the Rose-room. Later on, when the heat of the afternoon was past, they walked through the garden and down the vine-clad slopes to the beach, where old Florestano sat smoking his pipe with his back against a boat. He sprang up, on seeing them, as quickly as his rheumatism would permit.

‘Going for a row, signore?’ he said, when he had finished his lengthy congratulations, and had made Francesca blush deliciously.

‘Yes,’ said Carlo, flinging his coat into the stern; ‘but we shan’t want you, Florestano; we shall never want you any more,’ and, with a laugh, he shoved the boat down to the water’s edge.

'Ah, signorina,' said the old fisherman, chuckling, 'he is one to be proud of, that he is. Why, I do declare he might be a fisherman. Look at him now.'

And with delighted pride the old man watched the skill with which the strong, active figure in straw hat and shirt-sleeves set to work. Carlo looked round with a bright, glowing face. 'Come, Francesca, let us be off. Good-bye, Florestano. Ah, wait a minute, though! Have a cigar?'

He handed his case to the old fisherman, who helped himself with a smiling face, then he shoved the boat into the water, sprang in, and, taking the oars, rowed off towards Ischia.

The fisherman stood on the quiet and lonely beach watching them, and meditatively stroking one of his huge, projecting ears.

'Well, well,' he remarked, shrugging his shoulders, 'some of us be born to happiness and some to sorrow, there's no helping that. But all of us ought to be born to a fair chance of living somehow. So says the young signore, but I doubt me if, for all his hot words and his seeming near as much of a Socialist as any of us, he'd care to act it out in his life. Eh, eh! we be all of us ready enough to talk about others, but to live for them that's another matter.'

And, with a grim chuckle, Florestano pulled out a number of *La Campana* from his pocket, and, stretching himself on the pebbles, began to spell out more lessons in Socialism.

The sun was low in the heavens when the lovers returned from their row. Carlo had to hasten home to his mother, but later in the evening he once more appeared at Casa Bella. Apart from Francesca all his restless apprehension had returned.

Captain Britton was asleep in the dining-room. Francesca was in the dusky drawing-room seated at the piano, where two candles under rose-coloured shades made a little oasis of light. She was trying over her favourite of all Carlo's songs, '*Dio Possente*,' but broke off with a little cry of surprise and delight as he came towards her.

'I shall think that my ring is a fairy ring,' she cried, 'and brings me all I wish for. I was just longing to hear you sing this.'

Carlo had not felt in a singing humour, but her words drove everything else from his mind, and he sang perhaps all the better for the real care and anxiety which were oppressing him, certainly he sang as she had never before heard him sing.

'Piale is right,' she said at the close, brushing away the

tears from her eyes; 'nature meant you for a singer; you were Valentino then, and no one else.'

Carlo did not speak; she looked up at him quickly, and again saw that look of care which he had borne back with him from-Naples.

'My darling,' she said, making room for him on the ottoman beside her, 'you are keeping something from me; you are unhappy, Carlo *mio*, and yet you will not let me know.'

'Yes,' he said sadly, 'I must let you know; that is what I came back for. You remember Nita?'

'Your sister? Yes,—oh, yes. What of her? Has she written?'

'No, but to-day in Naples, as I walked down the Strada S. Trinità, I saw that she was to sing the week after next at the Mercadante.'

Francesca looked startled. All in a minute it flashed upon her that the perfect peace of their betrothal was disturbed, and that it could never return.

She knew enough of Nita's story to be aware how painful it would be for both Signora Donati and Carlo to have her as the *prima donna* of a Neapolitan theatre; but she tried hard to see gleams of possible good in the news.

'She may be sorry, and come to see you,' she suggested. 'Oh, surely she would come back to Villa Bruno when she is so near to it as Naples?'

But Carlo was not hopeful. She listened to all his doubts and fears with tender, womanly sympathy. She was no spoilt child caring only for the pleasure of her betrothal; perhaps, indeed, notwithstanding the ruffled peace, she had never been so happy as she was that evening when Carlo told her his troubles, and then, with his arm round her, whispered sweet words about the comfort of telling her.

Francesca quite agreed with Enrico that it would be better to say nothing as yet to the Signora Donati; and even in her anxiety there was keen pleasure in feeling that she had a right to share her lover's cares.

The next day was Sunday, and Carlo, as usual, drove in to the English church with the Brittons. But after the service he left them, pleading an engagement, and went off to see if Merlino's Company had arrived.

The Palazzo Forti was in a gloomy side street. He entered the courtyard, and found his way up a very dirty staircase to the third floor, where he rang and inquired whether Madame Merlino had arrived. An answer in the affirmative from a

bright-eyed little servant made his heart leap into his throat. He had not expected it. He had walked to the old Palazzo in the firm conviction that his sister would not yet have reached Naples, and to be told that she was actually close to him almost took away his breath. He hesitated a moment.

‘Is she within? can I see her?’ he inquired.

The servant seemed a little doubtful, but said she would ask, and, taking Carlo’s card, she disappeared, leaving him in the doorway. In all his life he had never felt so uncomfortable. He had never known Anita well; her convent education had made her practically a stranger to him, and now years had passed since their last meeting, and between them was the shadow of her wrong-doing. Then, too, he was not even sure whether he should see her alone, her husband might be there; and Carlo, being Italian and hot-tempered, was not quite sure how the sight of Merlino might affect him. He breathed quickly as the servant returned.

‘Would the Signore step this way for a minute?’

Setting his teeth, he followed the maid down a passage, and was ushered into a good-sized but comfortless-looking room. He was surprised and relieved to find within it neither his sister nor Merlino, but a young Englishman of about eight-and-twenty with fair hair and moustache, arched eyebrows, and keen light blue eyes, in which there was no mistaking the sparkle of genuine wit; but the face was a restless one, and the expression of careless good-humour was sometimes slightly tinged with bitterness. He bowed, then glanced again at the visitor with undisguised curiosity.

‘You are Madame Merlino’s brother, I think?’

Carlo assented.

‘I should have known you anywhere, the likeness is so strong.’

‘I speak English, if you prefer it, sir,’ said Carlo, noticing that the stranger’s Italian was far from fluent.

‘Do you? that will be a great relief, then. The patience of you foreigners amazes me. How you can learn our barbarous tongue I can’t conceive. For me, I only learnt enough of yours to satisfy my singing-master.’

‘May I ask whom I am speaking to?’ said Carlo.

‘I am Sardoni—that, at least, is my professional name—*primo tenore* of “the happy band of pilgrims” who patrol this wicked world under Merlino’s care. When they brought me your card just now I thought I might ask to see you, although Madame Merlino is out, for, to tell the truth, it is

quite time that Madame Merlino's friends and relations did something to save her. You must pardon the liberty I am taking, but, indeed, it is little use mincing matters in an affair of this kind.'

Carlo took a long look at the speaker. He was evidently an English gentleman—a man doubtless with faults enough, but yet, he instinctively felt, a man to be trusted.

'My sister is out, you say,' he began, with a troubled look.

'She went out driving this morning,' said Sardoni, promptly, 'with her usual cavalier, Comerio, our first baritone. But I know Comerio well, and he will not long be content to be a mere hanger-on. Every day Madame Merlino gets more under that man's power. He and she——'

But here he hastily broke off, for Carlo sprang forward with a gesture so threatening that anyone but an Englishman would have recoiled a pace.

'Be silent!' he thundered; 'how dare you couple my sister's name with the name of that brute?'

His dark eyes were all ablaze with anger. Sardoni was silent, not because he doubted the truth of his own words, but because he was obliged to pause and admire.

'I see you are the brother whom Madame Merlino needs,' he said, quietly; 'and it is in order that those two names may not with just cause be coupled together all the world over that I speak to you plainly.'

The glow of colour had faded from Carlo's face, and had left him unusually pale. He turned away with a groan as Sardoni ended. Vaguely as he had dreaded his sister's arrival, he had never dreamed that it would be so bad as this.

'Her husband?' he said at length.

'Merlino is a brute, but many degrees better than Comerio. 'Tis a sort of lion and unicorn business, with your sister for crown. But you spoke as though you knew Comerio?'

'I only know what report has to say of him,' replied Carlo. 'He was singing here five years ago; his wife and children, I believe, still live here.'

'Report says nothing of him that is not strictly true.'

'But how is it, then, that Merlino is so blind to his own interests as to keep him in his company?'

'I can't say, unless it is that tyrants always believe in their own superiority. And then, too, Comerio is such a wily devil, he always manages to keep in Merlino's good books. There has never been the least apparent reason for getting rid of him; and, besides, Merlino is not so over-burdened with wealth



that he can afford to cancel an engagement. Italian opera is not such a paying concern as people think.'

'I must try to see my sister,' said Carlo, with a sigh, 'or write to her.'

'Then if you see her allow me to suggest that you do not call on her here, where ten to one you will fall foul of her husband; and if you write, do so now and entrust the letter to me, for Merlino watches her correspondence with lynx eyes, and does not scruple to open every letter.'

Carlo uttered an impatient exclamation of disgust. Every sentence which the Englishman let fall seemed to reveal to him a fresh glimpse of the intolerable life which poor Nita was leading. He accepted the pen and ink which his companion offered him, however, and, drawing a chair to the table, began with deepening colour to write.

Sardoni glanced at him from time to time; he had taken up a newspaper, and made as though he were reading it, but in reality his mind was full of his Italian visitor. Carlo's face was almost as easy to read as a book, and Sardoni could not help feeling sorry for him. He had just witnessed one of the most painful sights imaginable, that of a perfectly unsullied nature being brought for the first time into near connexion with a network of evil. There was something, too, in the implicit trust which Donati had reposed in him which appealed to him strongly. What a wretched position to be in! Powerless to help his own sister without trusting to the help and believing in the honesty of a stranger and a foreigner! Carlo in the meantime had finished his letter, and, folding it up, handed it unsealed to Sardoni.

The Englishman put it in his pocket-book, remarking as he did so, 'For a perfect stranger you trust me with a good deal, Signor Donati.'

Carlo looked troubled as it flashed across him how unsuspiciously he had believed the stranger's words. It had never occurred to him that Sardoni could possibly have any reason for misleading him. He looked at him searchingly.

'But then, you are an Englishman,' he said, in a tone of relief.

Sardoni laughed. 'That is a compliment to my nation which I shall not readily forget. But look here,' an expression of great bitterness stole over his face, 'there are many of my own countrymen who would snap their fingers at my word of honour.'

Carlo again looked him through and through, and, as he

looked, the blue eyes seemed to grow less hard, to appeal against that harsh opinion which had just been mentioned.

‘Oh, as for that,’ said Carlo, with the expressive gestures of a Neapolitan, ‘that is just nothing at all to me. I trust you, *signore*.’

Sardoni smiled and grasped his hand.

‘I’ll not betray your confidence,’ he said.

And with that the two men parted.

Carlo went down the dirty stone stairs, looking pale and harassed. Sardoni with a flushed face returned to his newspaper, but still did not take in one word.

‘He trusted me,’ he thought to himself—‘he really did trust me. Oh, God! if I could only change natures with a fellow like that!’ Then, as some painful recollection brought hot tears to his eyes, he sprang up, and flinging aside his newspaper, strode across to the piano and began to play a waltz. ‘You are a fool, Jack! a fool! a fool! Why should that Italian make you think of it? A mere countrified innocent!’

And with that he played on recklessly, doing his best to forget Donati’s eyes.

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## CHAPTER VI

### THE STORM BREAKS

‘God be praised, that to believing souls  
Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair.’

*King Henry VI., Part II.*

How to break the news to his mother? this was Carlo’s sole thought as he walked home on that Sunday afternoon. - For an Italian he was an unusually good walker, having fallen a good deal into English habits through his close friendship with the Brittons; and perhaps it was to the free country life which he had always lived, and to his daily rides to and from Naples, that he owed his brilliant colouring and his healthy mind and body.

It tortured him to think that the story which had been a shock to him would be tenfold worse to his mother. It had been, as Sardoni observed, his first near connexion with evil, but to his mother it would be the first introduction to evil

at all. He had not lived the life of a Neapolitan student without coming across many *Comerios* ; but his mother, in her peaceful country life, her tranquil invalid existence, knew nothing of wickedness. His mind was so taken up with the difficulty of telling her that he had no leisure to think of the yet greater difficulty, how to help Anita.

He could not bear to be the one to bring her these bad tidings ; he half thought of asking Father Cristoforo to go to her ; then, ashamed of shrinking from a painful task, he forced himself to pass the old man's house and climbed the hill, turning over in his mind a dozen different ways of approaching the subject, and feeling satisfied with none of them.

There was something very beautiful in the devotion of this mother and son ; perhaps only Francesca and Clare knew how entirely Carlo had given his life to the work his father had left him, or how wonderfully it had helped to mould his character. To a woman it is second nature to devote herself to an invalid, nor does it involve any very serious break in her life ; but to a man, obliged to go on with his daily work at the same time, the strain of attendance in a sick-room is infinitely greater. If he can live this life for years, it gives him an established habit of always ruling his life by the needs of another, and not by his own desires.

There were two gates to the grounds of Villa Bruno. The one nearest to Naples was that which led into the stable-yard, and Carlo, from force of custom, went in this way, although he was on foot. He was surprised to see a hired carriage in the yard ; he wondered if possibly Frau Ritter had driven out to call on his mother, and paused on his way to the house to ask a servant who was the visitor.

'Oh, signore,' said the girl, flushing up, 'they say it is Madame Merlino !'

With an exclamation, which was almost a cry, he rushed on towards the house. His mother had had no preparation whatever—the shock might be fatal to her. And yet, surely it looked well that Nita should at once hurry home in this way ? Surely that in itself gave the lie to Sardonio's assertion ? And then it flashed across him that Nita would regard him in the light of the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son, and he prayed that he might be his direct opposite.

Flinging open the front door he hurried on, pausing for an instant outside the *salotto*. There was a sound of voices ; he hastily entered, glanced quickly towards his mother's couch, then towards his sister, who had risen at sight of him with a

look so frightened and timid that he longed to reassure her, as one longs to still the fears of a terrified child.

'Why, Nita!' he exclaimed, kissing her repeatedly, 'I have been trying to find you in Naples, but you were before me after all.'

Something in the tone of his '*Ben venuto*,' and in the many untranslatable Italian phrases with which he greeted her, brought the tears to Anita's eyes.

She watched intently while Carlo bent down to kiss his mother.

'You are cold, *madre mia*!' he exclaimed. 'You are faint and over-tired.'

'Ah, it is my fault!' cried Nita, vehemently. 'It is I who have tired her and broken her heart!'

He saw that there would be no quieting her just then, and took the law into his own hands.

'You must rest a little,' he said; 'you too are tired; and then, after dinner, mother will be fit to talk again. See, I will show you a room—the place is a little altered.'

With some difficulty he enticed her away, but no sooner were they alone than her tears again broke forth.

'Oh, Carlo! I am afraid I have been too much for her,' she exclaimed, 'and yet—and yet—I wanted so to come.'

'Yes, yes, I am so glad you came; only we must be careful!' said poor Carlo, distracted at the thought that she was keeping him from his mother, and much alarmed as he recollected how white and weary the invalid had looked. 'There, you will lie down and rest till dinner-time, will you not?'

'But I ought to go back,' sobbed Nita.

'Not yet,' he said; 'you must dine first; and now promise me to rest. There, I will not stay longer; I am a little anxious—she is not strong, you know.'

He tore himself away, and returned as fast as possible to the *salotto*. His mother's face was hidden; he could hear her low, gasping sobs.

'*Madre mia*!' he cried, and there was anguish in his voice. 'Oh, do not give way! She has come back to us, *carina*—all will be well, if only you will take care of yourself.'

'I must tell you——' she sobbed.

'Not now,' he said, 'not now, mother. Indeed you must be quiet or——'

'I must speak,' she said, 'it is killing me! I must speak now, that you may promise me to save her.'

'From her husband?' he asked, anxious to find how much she knew.

'No, no—from one she loves. Don't look like that, Carlo—her husband was so stern and cruel, and she was afraid of him, and—and this man was kind.'

'Kind!' ejaculated Carlo, with scorn indescribable.

'He always tried to shield her from her husband, and then, when they were leaving America, she was in debt and he lent her money, and——'

'Enough, darling; enough,' he said, with tenderness which contrasted strangely with his last ejaculation. 'She came and told you all, and now we can help her. If you love me, try to rest.'

But it was too late. The shock and the agitation had brought on one of the Signora's worst attacks. Carlo hastily summoned a servant, and the whole household came rushing together in a miserable confusion of helplessness. But the maids only glanced at their mistress's face and went away; they would have left their own relations rather than have stayed in a room where the Death Angel already hovered.

It was then, in his terrible, lonely watch, that Carlo thanked Heaven that Francesca was English. The doctor had already been sent for, but he left his mother for a moment and hurried towards the group of weeping women gathered round Anita.

'We have sent for Father Cristoforo, signore,' said one, hoping for a word of commendation for her forethought.

But Carlo took no notice, nor did his stern face soften.

'One of you go instantly,' he said, 'and fetch Miss Britton.'

Francesca knew little of sickness, nor had she ever seen death, but she had none of the Italian shrinking from a dying bed, in fact, every thought of herself was swallowed up in the one longing to be able to help Carlo. Cutting short the servant's tearful description of the Signora's state, she rushed out, not even pausing for a hat, and never stopped running till she reached the Villa Bruno. Then she pushed past the little group who would have detained her, knocked at the door of the *salotto*, and softly entered the room where, only a day or two before, they had spent such a happy evening.

For a moment she stood amazed, able to think of nothing but the havoc wrought in so short a time. Her lover knelt beside the couch, he looked ten years older than when they had parted that morning. The Signora, whose head rested on his arm, was haggard, ghastly, utterly changed, while the

indescribable look of approaching death upon her face seemed reflected in the young face that bent over her.

'Darling, is there anything I can do?' said Francesca, when she had wiped the damp brow and reverently kissed the dying woman.

'Nothing,' he replied, 'except to stay here. You do not mind?' He looked up at her with questioning eyes, which yet were sure of their answer.

'Oh, no!' she said. 'I am so thankful you sent for me.'

A long sigh escaped him; he tried to stifle it, lest it should disturb his mother, who lay with closed eyes. And after that the room was perfectly quiet, so quiet that Francesca could hear the ticking of her watch; while the canary in the window pecking the bars of his cage with his little pink beak, seemed to make a noise so loud that she wondered whether it would disturb the Signora.

At last there was a change in the wan face; the eyes opened, and the Signora looked up at Francesca with a smile.

Perhaps the beautiful face of the girl made her think of her own daughter, for the smile changed to a look of anguish as she turned her eyes to her son.

'Don't forsake Nita, promise me—save her—try to save her!'

The words were gasped out with an agony of tone indescribable. But yet it was not till Carlo's answer was given that Francesca's eyes brimmed over with tears.

'I promise, *madre mia*—I promise.'

His face was like the face of a saviour, strong, pure, and sweet; his voice was firm and clear. No one could have helped trusting him.

A look of rest—even of hopefulness—stole over his mother's face. She lay still for a few minutes, then turned again to Francesca with a most beautiful smile.

'He has never given me one moment's sorrow all his life,' she said.

The words, which would be sweet to remember in after years, which might bring in time to the lips of the son a reflection of the mother's smile as she uttered them, were just then more than he could endure. His fortitude gave way; he had little to reproach himself with, yet it grieved him now to remember that at times it had been a hard struggle to leave Naples and return to the quiet of Villa Bruno, and that sometimes he had, perhaps, lingered a little longer than he should have done at Casa Bella. Now his days of service were over,—she would no longer need his help.

With a cry, which tore Francesca's heart, he bent down,

clasping the dying form yet closer as he sobbed out a passionate appeal,—

‘Mother, mother, do not leave me!’

But the Signora was past hearing, past speaking—only she felt his close embrace, and, feebly raising her left hand, passed it behind his head with that gentle pressure—half caress, half support—which every woman knows how to bestow on a baby. And thus they stayed till the door opened, and the old priest and a little acolyte entered, barely in time to administer the last sacraments. Then Carlo regained his composure, stung into calmness by a sort of bitter resentment that an outsider must usurp those last sacred moments, and that he, heretic and alien, had no part or lot in the ceremony, and would be expected to leave the room. But Father Cristoforo, who was a son first and a Churchman afterwards, read his thoughts at once.

‘Stay, my son,’ he said, with so kind and fatherly a look, that Carlo’s bitter thoughts were banished, and he knelt on, still supporting his mother.

Francesca knelt, too, on the other side of the couch, but she could neither pray nor feel; she watched the scene like one in a dream. The sunshine streamed in through the window, lighting up the white unconscious face of the Signora and the grief-stricken face of her son, the rich vestments and tonsured head of the priest, the curious, roving eyes of the acolyte with his little silver-toned bell. But Francesca was still numb from the exceeding pain of watching her lover’s agony. Now he was peaceful once more; his thoughts were raised above the pain of the parting, but her thoughts would not follow. The monotonous voice of Father Cristoforo, as he intoned the service, seemed only to increase her dull stupor. It was not till the canary in the window broke out into a sudden burst of song that her heart seemed to awake once more, and to join in the familiar words, ‘*Gloria in excelsis Deo. Et in terra pax hominibus.*’ And then, as once more the service became unintelligible to her, she bent her head, and prayed on with fast-flowing tears, ‘God! I thank Thee that she is spared the pain—that it is only left for us.’

When she looked up once more, all was over. Father Cristoforo, with a few kind words, went quietly away; from without there was a sound of bitter weeping; but Carlo knelt on with bowed head and peaceful heart, and the Signora’s face was stamped with that calm majesty of death which Francesca had never before seen, and the canary in the window still sang his song of praise.

**CHAPTER VII**

**'NO ONE BUT YOU'**

**'You like to behold and even to touch the Cross, but, alas ! when the command comes to you to bear it !'—FÉNELON.**

FRANCESCA had lived many years in Italy, and had more than once witnessed the passionate demonstrations of sorrow in a bereaved household ; nevertheless, it was something of a shock to her to leave the quiet room of death and to go to Anita, whom she found surrounded by the weeping servants. They evidently took a melancholy pleasure in watching her violent paroxysms of grief.

To the English girl such a state of things seemed dreadful ; she did as she would have been done by, and induced the noisy mourners to go away, thinking that poor Anita would find whatever comfort there was for her in silence and solitude. She could not understand that total absence of the consciousness of others, which to a northern nature is so utterly foreign, and she would have left Anita with a few tender words and a long, close embrace had not the poor girl clung to her like a child with such wild sobs and tears, such loud, unrestrained crying, that Francesca began to understand that she must be comforted much as Sibyl needed comforting after some dire disaster.

At length, words began to frame themselves amid the sobs, a constant repetition of the one bitter regret which overpowered everything else—**'I have killed her ! I have killed her ! It is all my doing !'**

**'You could not tell—you could not know,'** said Francesca, feeling it hard indeed to find words to meet so terrible a grief, and weeping, too, for sympathy. **'She has been so much weaker of late—unable to bear any shock—but how could you know ? And, oh, Nita, she must have been so glad that you came !'**

**'No, no,'** sobbed Nita. **'I might have stayed away, and then she would have forgotten.'**

**'Never, for she loved you,'** said Francesca. **'Her last words almost were of you. Oh, if you could but have heard how she begged Carlo not to leave you !'**

But at this Nita only wept the more.

**'Carlo will hate me,'** she cried. **'Oh, let me go ! let me go ! Tell them to put in the horses. I can't stay here any longer.'**



'He does not hate you; he loves you,' said Francesca, warmly. 'He promised the Signora that he would always take care of you.'

Something in her tone quieted Nita. She lay musing over the words, wondering if, indeed, her brother knew all and would yet help her, trembling with fear at the thought of meeting him, and yet trembling still more when she thought of going back to Naples to face temptations too strong for her.

Francesca watched her tenderly, aware that some conflict was going on in her mind, though wholly ignorant of her story, and far too young and innocent to dream of the meaning which lay in the dying words of the Signora. Nita was in trouble, and in some sort of difficulty, and Carlo had promised to help her. Francesca did not curiously wonder what the difficulty might be, nor did she for one moment doubt Carlo's power of saving her. She accepted everything with the quiet confidence of a child who is vaguely conscious that there is trouble in the house, but is quite certain that its elders will soon make all right. Looking at Nita, she saw how strong a likeness existed between the brother and sister; and even if she had not felt drawn towards her before by her loneliness and her grief, this would have appealed to her. The fine profile and the warm, bright colouring were exactly alike, but the mouth was disappointing, and had the same weakness which had slightly spoilt the expression of Signora Donati; while the eyes, though large and beautiful, were lacking in soul, and might almost have been the eyes of a doll, so little did they vary. But yet, as Nita lay there in her grief and self-reproach, trying to make up her mind between two evils, wondering which fear was the least intolerable, there was something about her which pleaded for pity. She was so young, so weak—a parasite by nature, she seemed ready to cling to anything, no matter what it was, so long as it had the strength which she lacked.

She was afraid of sleeping in the same house as her dead mother, but then she was yet more afraid of confessing to her husband where she had been. She dreaded meeting Carlo, but she still more dreaded meeting Comerio. All at once it occurred to her to wonder who her companion was.

'I have forgotten your name, signorina,' she said, looking into the sweet, pure face above her; 'but I think you must be Carlo's English playmate from Casa Bella.'

'Yes; I am Francesca Britton,' she replied, quietly, not liking just then to speak of her happy betrothal.

'Ah! how shocked I was in the old days at the games you

and he played together !' said Nita, wistfully. ' And now—now it is I who have shocked you all. But you were quite right all the time. I have seen American life since then, and if we Italian girls had something of their liberty, there would not be so many broken hearts among us.'

The words reminded her of her grief, and she again burst into tears.

' Let me fetch Carlo,' said Francesca. ' He will comfort you as no one else can. Oh, you must not say you are afraid of him, that is only because you have forgotten. And I may tell him that you will stay, may I not?—you could not leave him all alone.'

Nita sobbed out something inarticulate, which Francesca took for a consent, and hurried away in search of her lover. She found him in the *salotto*, but the body of the Signora had been carried to her own room, and Carlo, looking broken-hearted, was trying to write a letter to his uncle to tell him the news. Softly passing her arm round his neck, and with her cool cheek leaning against his heated brow, she stood by him for some moments in silence.

' I must go home, my own,' she said, at length. ' Father will have come back, and will not know where I am. May I ask him to come in and see if he can help you in any way?'

Carlo thanked her. He felt dazed and bewildered; he thought it would be a comfort to have the help of the kind-hearted Englishman, who delighted in managing other people's affairs.

' And then there is Nita !' he exclaimed, with a look of perplexity. That promise which he had made returned to him. It lay like a heavy weight on his burdened mind; he had promised to save her, but how to perform that promise he had not an idea.

' It was about Nita I wanted to speak to you,' said Francesca. ' She said at first that she must go back to Naples at once, and seemed to dread meeting you. But I think—I really think she would stay if you went to her and let her see that you care for her still. She is in terrible distress, and no one but you can comfort her, Carlo *mio*.'

' No one but you !—No one but you !' The words haunted him as he turned to go to Nita. His mother had trusted all to him; Francesca, too, seemed to think that with him lay the sole chance of reaching his sister. Their very confidence seemed to crush him; he was utterly at a loss to know what he should do or say; he could not even feel acutely, sympathy

seemed dead, his heart cold and numb with suffering, and yet, impelled by the truth of those words, 'No one but you!' he entered Nita's room. Her face was buried in the pillow, she was sobbing aloud, and took no notice of his presence. He sat down by the bed and mechanically took her hand in his; her sobs did not move him, and no words of comfort came to his lips.

But all at once, as he watched the little hand which lay in his, a keen pang of pain shot through his heart. The hand was like his mother's hand, so much like that he could hardly believe it was not hers; he pressed it to his lips with love and reverence, for the first time in his life fully realising the meaning of brotherhood. With that pain and that new vision his heart awoke once more, his work lay before him, his perplexity melted in a rush of love and pity, and that eager longing to help which swallows up diffidence and proves its own guide.

'Nita *mia*!' he said, his tears falling fast on the little white hand, 'do not cry like that. She is at rest—at rest, and very happy; we dare not wish her back again.'

'But I—but I have killed her!' sobbed Anita.

'No, never say that—never think it,' he cried; 'you did right to come home, quite right. It is the will of God.'

No contact with Enrico's sceptical philosophy had been able to mar that wonderful childlike faith which is one of the most beautiful characteristics of an Italian. *Sia fatta la volontà di Dio*. The words were spoken with a grave simplicity which would have startled an Englishman. He did not pause to think of the proper thing to say, or reflect for one instant how his words would affect others, he just spoke out the perfect assurance which, in his terrible grief, had been his own refuge.

'You must know, Nita,' he resumed, as she grew more quiet, 'that I have heard all; she told me; and she died happy because she was sure you would be saved from this. You will not let her hope be vain.'

'If you would help me,' faltered Anita.

'I will—I will!' he cried eagerly. That was no time to think of details or of difficulties, he could only give her his unqualified promise. Then, when the two had discussed things a little more, it was arranged that Carlo should write a note to Merlino, and tell him that Anita would remain for a few days at the Villa Bruno.

'And, oh! write carefully,' exclaimed Nita; 'see that you do not offend him.'

Carlo wrote a cautiously worded letter, and sent it in to

Naples by old Florestano, who also bore the ill news to Guido Donati and to the Ritters, and, that he might make all the more speed, was prevailed on to accept a seat in the carriage which had brought Nita that morning.

Thus in a weary round of petty duties the time wore on, and at length night came. Carlo slept little, however, and rose the next day but ill prepared for the work before him. Nothing but the lifelong habit of making his own needs stand second to the needs of others, kept him up. With regard to the funeral there was little for him to arrange, as all was managed after the usual custom by one of the *congregazione*, the relatives not even going to the church or the grave. But he had to interview Father Cristoforo, to talk to Captain Britton, to receive Uncle Guido, who drove over from Naples at noon, and to do his best to shield Anita from reproaches, taking good care that the elder Donati should not hear one word about Comerio.

And always through the livelong day, above his grief, above the well-meant condolences of his friends, there rang in his head one unanswerable question—how to save Nita; and with that Francesca's words, 'No one but you!' In the evening, when all was over and the sad coming and going had given place to a terrible, oppressive quiet, his grief and perplexity made him turn to Enrico Ritter, with the feeling that unless he unburdened his mind to some one he should lose his senses. It was true that Francesca partly divined his trouble, but he could not discuss his difficulties with her, could not bear to unfold to her so dark a page. Sardoni, his informant, was a total stranger; Captain Britton was the last man to whom he could turn; while Uncle Guido, with his uncertain temper, and his wrath at the stain which Anita had already brought upon the family name, was little likely to give helpful counsel in this matter. Enrico, 'purely to please himself,' had hastened over to Villa Bruno, and now inevitably Carlo turned to him, and, exacting a promise of secrecy, told him everything that had happened since their last meeting.

He had chosen his confidant well. Enrico could be trusted to keep perfect silence; moreover, his sound common-sense, his cool, calm, practical way of looking at things, was precisely what Carlo needed. His own brain was so over-wrought, so confused with the sudden calamity which had befallen him, that he was not in the least capable of seeing any matter in its true light. And then, too, the mere relief of sharing his perplexities with another was an inexpressible comfort. Not that Enrico had many suggestions to offer; he listened for the most

part in silence. But then there are times in life when the silence of a friend is the one thing for which we crave; and Carlo turned to the unspoken sympathy of the man who really cared for him when wearied with the condolences of outsiders. Guido Donati had spoken of returning the next day to discuss the future, but the really perplexing future was discussed with the German pessimist.

'There is only one thing I would advise you, and that is, have no personal communication with Comerio,' said Enrico at length. 'I have seen him, and, into the bargain, know a good deal about him, and he's the veriest devil you can conceive. Pay him back the money, but do so through some third person.'

'I'm sure I have no wish to see him,' said Carlo, sighing. 'If only I could think of some way of getting rid of him.'

That there would be any difficulty in raising the money had not as yet occurred to Carlo. He had been extremely careless about money matters all his life; and though leading too secluded a life to be precisely extravagant, he had allowed things to drift, well content so long as he received his small annual allowance from his mother, and never troubling his head about the amount of their actual income. He knew that he was to be his uncle's heir, and to receive a very comfortable allowance from him on his marriage, therefore he left all details to his mother, took what came to him, and lived on in serene comfort. Compelled now to face the situation, he was startled to find how entirely dependent he was upon his uncle; the income upon which they had lived had been derived from an annuity, and of course ceased at his mother's death; the Villa Bruno was only rented by the year, and though its furniture belonged to him it was worth but little. His only other possession was his horse, and he could not well part with that to raise the necessary money, for not only would it at once have provoked a question from his uncle, but it was indispensable to him so long as he lived in that remote country place. In the end Enrico, becoming aware of his embarrassment, said that he should ask his father to advance him the money; and as the need of a loan was quite comprehensible to Herr Ritter at such a time, he very willingly acceded to the request, and Enrico himself was charged with the disagreeable errand of conveying the money to Comerio.

This was one step in the desired direction, and one care off Carlo's mind; but his perplexity about Anita only increased, for, as each day he learnt to know her better, he was forced to own to himself how utterly unfit she was for the difficult life

before her. Her beauty, her weakness, her moral cowardice, her miserable marriage, all were against her. She seemed incapable of really loving, capable only of a sort of desire to be caressed and shielded. Carlo gained a certain amount of influence with her, just because she trusted like a child to his strength, and was quite certain that he would do what he could for her; but she left everything to him, and, in those bitter days of his grief and perplexity, lived on in a placid, restful state which was almost happiness.

At length an interruption came to this state of things. One afternoon Sardonì drove over from Naples; Carlo was heartily glad to see him, and received him with a warmth which seemed to please the Englishman.

'I was afraid you would always dislike me as the bearer of ill news,' he said; 'I came partly to give you back your letter, which, of course, I have not had a chance of giving to Madame Merlino. She is still with you?'

'Yes, she is still here,' said Carlo, tearing the letter in pieces, and stifling a sigh as he remembered how different all had been when he wrote it.

'I came partly to warn you that Merlino intends soon to send for your sister,' said Sardonì; 'indeed, it is really a necessity that she should come back, for the first rehearsal is on Monday, and the theatre is to open next Thursday.'

'So soon. And as yet I have done nothing!' exclaimed Carlo.

'Are you so sure of that?' asked Sardonì, with a keen glance at him. 'You have at any rate succeeded in making Comerio your bitter enemy; and, by the bye, I have discovered one thing which may, perhaps, be of service to you; Comerio's engagement was for three years, but may be terminated in half that time either at Merlino's option or at his own.'

'When does the first half expire?'

'In three weeks' time,' said Sardonì.

Carlo thought for a few minutes in silence; then he said somewhat abruptly, 'I wish you would just tell me plainly what sort of a man Merlino is; I can gather but little from what my sister lets fall about him.'

'I can't draw a very pleasing picture of him,' said Sardonì, with a smile, 'for, truth to tell, there is no love lost between us. He has very little education, but that is a subject of regret to him; since his marriage he has become moral and respectable, but he is the most awful tyrant I ever had the misfortune to meet with. Of course his position tends to foster a love of power; for don't you see the manager of an operatic

company is like a king, not a constitutional one, but a despot—an autocrat. Then your sister, if you will pardon my bluntness, was the very last sort of wife he ought to have had. She is afraid of him and has no notion of holding her own, and he—great brute—treats her abominably. Why don't you persuade her to try for a separation?'

'I could not be a party to that,' said Carlo, 'so long as he is faithful to her. That a man has a bad temper is no fit reason for breaking the marriage vow.'

'Those notions are old-fashioned,' said Sardoni, with a rather pitying smile.

But the smile quickly died away; for Carlo, with a dignity indescribable, made him a little bow and dismissed the subject with a calm—'That is very possible, signore.'

There was a world of expression, both in tone and gesture, and Sardoni saw that to argue about his suggestion would be useless.

'If you reject that idea,' he said, after a silence, 'there is only one alternative—Comerio must be got rid of. I have thrown out as many hints as I dare to Merlino, all to no purpose. To tell him the truth plainly would make him ten times more brutal to your sister, and is altogether out of the question, even if one had the right. Why, he would be a fiend incarnate! You know what Italian husbands are when once their jealousy is stirred up.'

Carlo involuntarily smiled, then, tickled by the speaker's ingenuous remark, fairly laughed.

Sardoni looked confused.

'I beg your pardon,' he said; 'but indeed I had forgotten that I was not talking to a fellow-countryman—a compliment to your accent, you see. Where did you become such a proficient?'

'Our nearest neighbours are English,' said Carlo, not caring to explain any further, though instinctively his eyes turned towards a photograph of Francesca which stood on the mantelpiece. Sardoni's keen eyes noted this. He observed the photograph with secret admiration and drew his own conclusions.

'Then how do you propose that Comerio shall be got rid of?' said Carlo, breaking the silence. 'You do not imagine, signore, that we Italians—about whom, it appears, you are in the habit of generalising—carry stilettos and conveniently dispose of our foes by a stab?'

'There is only one way of getting rid of him,' said Sardoni. 'Merlino is always trying to cut down expenses, and with very

good reason, for, as I told you before, the opera is not always a paying concern. Now, if before the agreement with Comerio is renewed you can find a baritone with as good a voice who will sing on lower terms, then I have little doubt that Merlino would settle with him and give Comerio his *cong  *.'

'You must have been talking with Piale, signore?' said Carlo, conscious of a vague feeling of discomfort.

'Piale?' said Sardoni, looking puzzled; 'I do not know any one of the name.'

'Ah! then it was only an odd coincidence. But he is a well-known professor, and he has a pupil—a baritone—whom he is very anxious to bring out; he was talking to me about it only a few days ago.'

'Why, then, there is good hope for our plans,' said Sardoni. 'A beginner would expect far less than Comerio, and, if he really has a good voice and some dramatic power, no doubt Merlino would catch at him. What sort of looking fellow is he? Have you seen him? Is he presentable?'

A bright, sudden smile lit up Carlo's sad face for a minute.

'Of that I am no fit judge,' he said demurely, 'for I am the pupil in question.'

'You!' ejaculated Sardoni, in amazement. Then, recollecting his question, he began to laugh. 'Well, I have my answer in an unmistakable form. There can be no doubt that you are well fitted for the stage.'

Again his companion made that funny little Italian bow, in which there lurked so much dignity. There was just a shade of irony in his expression.

'I see the prospect does not attract you,' said Sardoni; 'yet I should fancy you might do great things on the stage, from the look of you.'

'But I hope for a very different life, signore.'

'I see. Well, I would be the last to tell you that our life is an enviable one. Some people seem to fancy that an actor's life is "all beer and skittles"—I thought so once myself, but I can tell you that's a confounded mistake.'

Carlo had never felt less inclined to discuss the merits of theatrical life; he devoutly wished that Sardoni would go; that feeling of vague discomfort grew upon him.

'Well,' he said, 'I will see if possibly Piale may know of someone else capable of taking Comerio's place; and I am greatly obliged to you, signore, for your suggestions and your help.'

Sardoni perceived that he wished to be alone, and, leaving



a message of inquiry for Madame Merlino, took his departure.

But the discomfort which his presence had kept vague and undefined, broke into a clear, torturing perception when Carlo was once more alone. Over and over the words rang in his head—'No one but you!—no one but you!' He tried to stifle them, he argued with himself on the folly of the idea—he said it was impossible, Quixotic, preposterous. Finally, he hurried off to Casa Bella.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### PIALE SCHEMES

'Wilt thou go forth into the friendless waste  
That hast this Paradise of pleasure here?'

*The Light of Asia.*

THERE are some who consider that a hero must be practically immaculate, and who grumble sorely if called upon to study the life of an ordinary mortal who often stumbles when the road is rough, who shrinks from the Valley of Humiliation, and takes a foolish, fleeting delight in Bypath Meadow. But if the function of all art is to picture life,—not to photograph, but to paint it,—then, without doubt, the typical hero of romance with his faultless features and his preternatural nobility must disappear for ever from the canvas; for where are these perfect beings who, in spite of cruel circumstances, never fall, who never harbour selfish thoughts—never speak hasty words?

Thank God, one meets plenty of good men, but the best of them would certainly own that there had been times when they had felt ready to tear their tongues out in vain regret for irrevocable words—that they would give almost anything to live over again some misguided bit of their lives.

Carlo Donati was not an immaculate hero of romance, but a nineteenth-century man,—a man of flesh and blood, with a quick, ardent, sanguine temperament and strong passions. When those words which the English tourist let fall in the Neapolitan *caff  * had arrested his attention, he had been pricked at heart, and for the time vaguely disquieted. A yet deeper impression had been made upon him by his promise to his mother on her death-bed. Still, all had been vague and form-

less. Now, Sardoni's bald, matter-of-fact statement had plunged the sword much farther, had called up before him a plain, unmistakable way of helping Anita. The typical hero would of course have flung himself into the breach without an instant's hesitation, but Carlo did no such thing; he did not even allow his thoughts to dwell on the possibility, but just turned his back on the whole matter, tried to make Anita's visit as pleasant as might be, and sought refuge from his own sad memories in daily meetings with Francesca.

He did, however, to some extent follow Sardoni's advice, and, intrusting Piale with as much of the truth as he deemed necessary, wrote to ask him whether he knew of any singer who might be found to take Comerio's place. He also wrote to Merlino, obtaining further leave of absence for his sister, on condition that she drove into Naples each day next week for rehearsal, and finally returned when the performances began. The days sped by rapidly enough, and on the Thursday, true to his promise, Carlo took his sister back, parting with her at the entrance to the Palazzo Forti, not without regret and apprehension. Mingled, however, with these came a sense of deep relief, for, from a selfish point of view, he could not but revel in his regained freedom: his life could never again be what it had been before Anita's return, but a sort of after-glow of the old times seemed to rise in his sky when the cloud of poor Nita's immediate presence was removed. He felt hopeful, too, for Piale had written to ask him to call at twelve o'clock, and he thought that perhaps he had found a desirable baritone.

The old Maestro received him very kindly, but soon dashed his expectations to the ground.

'I know of no one,' he said emphatically,—'no one. You speak as if good baritones were as rife as mushrooms. And, look you, Comerio is a clever actor, and has a fine voice; you'll not easily find any one to beat him, and if you did it is unlikely enough that they would take lower terms. Besides, Merlino is extremely unpopular as a manager; only just now I had his conductor in, a capital young fellow—Marioni, and he says that they all find it almost impossible to work with him. You must give up that idea; I, at any rate, cannot help you in it.'

Carlo sighed, and fell into deep thought. He did not hear footsteps on the stairs, nor notice that some one entered the inner room, which was divided from the front one only by a curtain. But Piale heard, and abruptly changed the subject.

'You have been neglecting your voice, I fear,' he said, looking critically into his pupil's face, and grieving to see what a change trouble had wrought in it. 'Not that I blame you in the least: there are times, of course, when even music must go to the wall. Let me hear you.'

He made him work for a time at *solfeggi*, then broke into an impatient exclamation, forgetting everything but his art. 'Out of practice—shockingly out of practice,' he said, with a portentous frown; 'try this.'

He took down a copy of *Faust* and played the opening bars of '*Dio Possente*.' The frown and the impatient ejaculation incited Carlo; he cared intensely to please his old master, and, throwing his whole soul into the music, and losing his own identity in that of Valentino, he gave an almost perfect rendering of the song.

Suddenly the curtain between the two rooms was torn back, and a black-bearded man, with swarthy face, and extremely small, dark eyes, with a restless, irritable look in them, hastened forward.

'Signor Piale, I congratulate you!' he exclaimed, 'you have produced the most promising singer of the day! No wonder you are proud of your pupil!'

He was evidently carried away by the excitement of the moment, for his face, naturally most disagreeable, was illuminated with the same glow of artistic delight which, as the song proceeded, had softened Piale's rugged features.

For a minute an observer would have noticed that the two listeners had forgotten everything but their art, while Carlo was still Valentino, not himself. There was a silence; the old Maestro looked triumphantly happy; the stranger turned his small, restless eyes on the singer, and Carlo gradually awoke to the recollection that he was not Valentino going off to the war and praying for the safety of his sister, but Anita's brother with far greater cause for anxiety, and with his hopes of assistance from Piale dashed to the ground.

All at once he came to full consciousness of the actual present, and found the stranger undisguisedly taking stock of him, looking him over from head to foot with interest and curiosity. Carlo, unaccustomed to this sort of appraising stare, felt the blood rush to his cheeks, yet it was no sense of the stranger's rudeness which aroused his strong antipathy. He looked hastily at the black-bearded visitor, looked again, angry with himself at being so much moved, then instinctively he recoiled a pace.

'The likeness is extraordinary!' exclaimed the new comer, turning to Piale and startling him from his happy reverie.

'Likeness!' ejaculated the old musician, still half in the clouds, but dimly perceiving that sublunary affairs were somehow gone awry. 'Likeness! Not at all, signore, not at all; there's not a voice like that in all Italy.'

'I don't speak of the voice,' said the stranger, impatiently, 'but the face is like my wife's—curiously like.'

The old musician looked dismayed; he was fully awake now, art was forgotten, and a perilous bit of real life lay before him. In two strides Carlo was beside him, his face flushed, his eyes full of suppressed anger.

'Maestro,' he panted, 'what is this? what is this that you have done to me?'

'Forgive me,' said the old man, 'I am not so much to blame as you think. I did indeed invite Signor Merlino to hear you sing, but with the understanding that he should not appear. You broke faith with me, signor.'

'A thousand pardons,' said Merlino, coolly; 'but in truth your pupil ought to be pleased with the compliment. I was so carried away by his singing that I forgot all. I don't understand what all this fuss is about.'

He glanced at Carlo, who had turned away at his first words, and stood now at the window with his back to them, evidently struggling to restrain an outburst of passion. Piale looked at him, too, with compunction, but with great bewilderment. How was he to get matters set right? how disentangle himself from the confusion into which Merlino's impulsive entrance had plunged everything?

Carlo stood looking out into the busy street, but he saw nothing, was conscious of nothing but that Merlino was in the room with him—Merlino, the cause of all his sorrow and perplexity. He had conquered by a supreme effort the first savage impulse to fly at the throat of the man who had caused his mother so much grief, but fierce anger still burnt in his heart and sent fiery blood coursing through his veins. A storm of wrathful indignation consumed him as he thought of Merlino's misdeeds; he was angry, too, with Piale, feeling naturally enough that a snare had been laid for him; and he was angry with himself because even in this moment of confusion he was aware that he had deliberately turned his back on the question now forced upon him, and that want of preparation was his own fault.

For moments of what seem to us sudden temptation are

seldom really sudden. God has given us our times of preparation, and if we have wilfully neglected them the conflict is severer, or perhaps ends in defeat.

How was he now to think out the frightfully involved question at issue? How decide on the right course of action? And yet a false step might prove Nita's ruin. The anguish of that thought, and the loathing of his own selfish procrastination, calmed his anger. With an effort he yielded up his will, and therewith forgot Merlino's presence, because another presence absorbed him wholly.

He was interrupted by a touch on his arm. Piale stood beside him, with a look of deep concern on his kind old face.

'Carlo mio,' he said, in a low voice, 'I apologise to you, and beg your forgiveness; but since things have so fallen out, perhaps you will permit me to introduce you to Signor Merlino, who will then understand us better.'

Carlo assented, subduing the angry thoughts which yet struggled to find place in his heart.

'Signore,' said the old musician, approaching Merlino, 'there is nothing extraordinary in the likeness you observed. Permit me to introduce you to Signor Donati.'

Merlino started violently, and for a minute looked abashed, and greatly confused. Piale with much curiosity watched his pupil, who had turned from the window as he spoke, and now, with a face as pale as death, bowed gravely.

There was an awkward pause, broken presently by Carlo.

'I brought my sister to Palazzo Forti an hour ago, signore,' he said, speaking to Merlino with grave courtesy; 'I am much obliged to you for sparing her to me so long.'

The speech cost him a great deal, but he was glad that he had brought himself to make it, for he had no wish to quarrel with Nita's husband; indeed, he fully recognised Merlino's rights, though unable to think patiently of the way in which he had acquired them, or the manner in which he now abused them.

'A few days' rest will doubtless have been good for Anita,' said Merlino, complacently, speaking of his wife much as he might have spoken of an over-worked horse; 'she has had hard work in America, nor can we afford now to be idle. It is a pleasure to me to make your acquaintance, signore. If I could induce you to follow your sister's example and use your great talents professionally, it would give me the greatest satisfaction.'

Carlo's heart began to throb painfully. Could it be that he was called to this? Could it be that this man—this coarse, brutal tyrant—was to prove the arbiter of his destiny? The words which a few days before he had used so emphatically to Sardoni trembled on his lips, 'I hope for a very different life.' But he managed to strangle them. Had he not offered up his will? He stood silent, waiting for guidance, hoping against hope, as is the way with poor mortals, that, after all, his own will might be done. He waited. At length Piale spoke; the words fell on him like blows.

'I have long urged upon my pupil, signore, the duty of going on the stage, for which he is admirably fitted. I am not without hope that circumstances may prompt him at length to consent. But there is as yet no vacancy in your troupe, I think, so I fear that you will not have the honour of introducing to the public both Madame Merlino and Carlo Donati.'

Carlo stood silently listening to the discussion of his fate, looking now at Piale's brown, wrinkled face, with its parchment-like skin, furrowed brow, and crown of bushy, grizzled hair, now at the disagreeable face of Merlino. He knew that when the Impresario spoke next he would say that Comerio's engagement might be terminated very shortly if he so willed; knew that Merlino was once more appraising him, observing the symmetry of his face and figure, calculating whether he would 'draw.' He felt like a slave in the market, but still he waited and held his peace.

'It shall not be my fault if I lose the honour,' said Merlino at length; 'by good luck Comerio's engagement is terminable at eighteen months if I so please; may be ended, that is, in a fortnight's time. What say you, Signor Piale? Could you have your pupil fit to fill the vacancy in so short a time as that?'

Piale was not to be daunted, though he knew well enough that the time was very short indeed for the preparation which would be necessary.

'Whether Comerio's costumes could be altered for him so soon is perhaps doubtful,' he replied proudly; 'they might or might not be ready in a fortnight's time; but my pupil will be ready—quite ready.'

'Well, I'll risk it,' said Merlino, who was a keen-eyed man of business, and knew that Carlo would prove a good speculation. 'I am prepared to offer you, signore, an engagement of three years, terminable at the end of the first year at the wish

of either party. As to the salary, we shall not quarrel I think, "*Oro è, che oro vale*," let me see——'

He began to make a calculation and to discuss money matters with Piale, who, in his delight at the prospect of at length inducing his pupil to go on the stage, was ready to accede to almost any terms.

Carlo, still with that thought of the slave-market in his mind, watched the discussion like one in a dream, paying little heed to the details. It mattered nothing to him, just then, whether he received five pounds a-week or fifty; it mattered supremely that he had prayed for guidance, and that immediately after there had come to him this definite offer. He dared not refuse, he hesitated to accept. Silencing the fiends' voices which urged him at once to decline Merlino's proposal, at once to seek the selfish peace which that decision would bring, he braced himself up for a reply. The haggling at length ended, and Merlino turned to him.

'Well, Signor Donati, you hear my offer, and Signor Piale approves of the terms; it rests with you now to accept them or not. It is not for me to advise you either one way or the other; but, in my own mind, I have little doubt that, if you work well, you will be one of the first singers of the day.'

Piale's eyes shone; he could hardly contain himself, so great was his excitement. It damped his ardour to see that this glorious prospect brought no faintest gleam of pleasure to his pupil's face. He scratched his parchment-like cheek ferociously, a trick which he had when anything annoyed him or tried his patience. At length Carlo spoke:

'I am obliged to you for your offer, signore, but you will understand that it is impossible for me to accept it on the spur of the moment. The decision will affect others; I must think of them as well as of myself. I must consult those who belong to me.'

'Well, well,' said Merlino, impatiently, 'so long as you keep the matter quiet—so long as it does not come to Comerio's ears, I don't object to that; but I can't afford to be off with him till I am on with you.'

'I promise you all shall be kept quiet,' said Carlo. 'How soon must you know my decision?'

'Meet me next Wednesday at the Mercadante—or, better still, if Signor Piale will permit, at this house, and I will have the contract ready. That leaves you nearly a week, and I shall quite hope for a favourable reply. I shall, in the meantime, not breathe a word of this to my wife, who, of course,

will be charmed to have you in the troupe. Good-day, signore, and let me entreat you not to throw away this opportunity. A thousand thanks, Signor Piale, for your courtesy, and pray forgive my impetuous entrance.'

He bowed himself out.

Carlo watched him as he walked down the street—watched him in a sort of stupor. When he had disappeared, his eyes turned to a heavily laden mule just coming into sight, with waving green boughs tied about its head to keep off the flies ; it toiled patiently on, the lazy boy in charge hanging on to its tail with his right hand, while he devoured a great hunch of bread clasped fast in his left. Carlo watched with a sort of envy the placid calm of the sunburnt lad—that picture of lazy content contrasted so oddly with the state of his own mind. Piale soon added to the fierceness of the storm by urgent and almost piteous entreaties that he would accept Merlino's offer. With tears in his eyes, the old musician paced to and fro, passionately declaiming upon the sacred calling, and the duty of not allowing such great gifts to rust unused ; and Carlo listened with the reluctant attention of one who does not wish to be persuaded. It was bad enough to fight against his own convictions ; he did not want Piale's arguments to make the conflict yet more severe.

'I tell you,' urged the old man, 'that Italian opera is dying—dying for want of fit exponents. There is scarcely a man whom one cares to listen to, and it will never be kept alive by two or three *primo donne*. You might revive it, and yet you hesitate. *Corpo di Bacco!* Is it that you are unaware of your gifts ? Is it that your very modesty is to prove the bane of your life and the destruction of my hopes ? Listen to me—it is the plain truth I am telling you, and you well know I never flatter. For years upon years Italy has produced no great tenor, or baritone, or bass ; now she has produced you ; and, if you work well, you will be the first singer in Europe. Italy has produced you, and then you persist in hiding your light under a bushel ! *Diavolo!* 'tis enough to try the patience of a saint !'

'Dear Maestro !' said Carlo, with a faint smile, 'what can I do more than promise to consider this offer ? How can you expect me to decide all in a moment ? Ah !'—a quick sigh escaped him—'do you not see what it will involve ?'

'*Hein!* What it will involve ? Why, yes ; I understand that it might postpone your marriage for a time. Art demands some sacrifices.'

'And what right have I to sacrifice Francesca's happiness ?'



To a duty perhaps even that might be right, but to a dream of fame—never!’ He laughed; the idea when put into words seemed to him so preposterous.

‘Happiness be damned!’ cried Piale, with righteous indignation. ‘I have yet to learn that Italy produced you, and England produced Miss Britton, that you might be happy. And do I not know Miss Britton? Can I for one moment dream that she would wish to hold you back? Why, by all saints, no! My dear boy, you are young—young. Believe me, a girl is always willing to wait when the good of her lover is in question. As to Captain Britton, he can’t have lived all these years in Italy and yet retain his Puritan notions in all their strictness. He may object at first, but, hearing all the circumstances of the case, he will soon give way. Courage, Carlo mio! For a great gain, a momentary sacrifice!’

Perhaps it was that word ‘momentary’ which showed Carlo plainly what he had before felt dimly, that Piale knew nothing whatever about the sacrifice in question.

Much as he loved the old man, he could bear his presence no longer, but hastily took leave with a few incoherent words about ‘time’ and ‘thinking it over.’ He fled from his old singing-master as those in trouble or perplexity always do flee from glib talk. It is the one intolerable thing, as exasperating to the nineteenth-century man as the glib talk of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar was to poor Job.

‘Momentary, indeed! A momentary sacrifice!’ The idea made him indignant and yet pitiful. Had Piale lost his manhood in his art-life? Had he so little conception of what it was to love that he could speak thus? And then he tried to imagine to himself the fulfilment of the Maestro’s wish; he had a vision of himself, old and grey-headed, enjoying the sense of his fame and his world-wide reputation, and calmly advising some other in the heyday of youth to renounce love and happiness.

It was not till he was confronted by a huge poster, in which the names of Madame Merlino and Comerio shone out conspicuously, that he once more perceived the true facts of the case. This was no question between the merits of marriage and of art-life; it was the question whether he should choose happiness for Francesca and himself, or choose the possibility of saving his sister. Life is made up of such decisions—some of them petty, some of them overwhelmingly great, but all of them momentous. We hate the thought of the choice, long to gain without losing, hope to triumph without sacrifice, strive and struggle and fret in the vain effort to break through,

the inexorable law that those who find their life must first lose it. Truly, 'men are not more willing to live the life of the Crucified.'

Again those words returned to Carlo's mind; they grated upon him even more than when he had first heard them spoken—perhaps because, while far from understanding them, he began vaguely to perceive their drift. He saw a dim, distasteful vision of self-renunciation; he did not see that true self-renunciation implies the peace-giving presence of One in whose service we renounce.

While he was still all confused and agitated by this inward conflict he was waylaid by Herr Ritter.

'Whither away?' exclaimed the old man, kindly. 'You are never thinking of going to Pozzuoli in this heat. Come home with me; it is long since I saw you. You are looking fagged, Carlo.'

Recollecting the obligation he was under to Enrico's father, Carlo felt that it would not do to refuse his hospitality, though, truth to tell, he had never felt less inclined for a visit to the kindly German household. He, the laughter-loving, felt that he could not endure the sound of laughter; he, the impulsive and unreflecting, had actually come to such a point that he desired nothing so much as quiet and solitude to think out this great question.

He did not get much quiet in the Ritter household, but he met with that hearty, vociferous kindness which Enrico's family knew so well how to bestow. Frau Ritter had never before been so motherly, the daughters of the house never so anxious to do what they could for him. Enrico himself was unusually silent; he watched his friend narrowly, perceiving from his face that matters must be worse rather than better since their last meeting. Possibly, however, the parting with his sister might account for the troubled expression he bore; and when, after dinner, the two friends were left alone, Enrico turned eagerly to the subject which the others had studiously avoided.

'Madame Merlino has left you, I suppose?' he began. 'She makes her first appearance to-night, I see.'

'She left this morning,' said Carlo, 'and sings to-night in *Don Giovanni*.'

'Why should you go back to the empty house? Spend the night here,' suggested Enrico.

Carlo hesitated.

'It would be my best chance of seeing Comerio,' he said, thoughtfully.

‘How do you mean?’

‘If I slept here and went this evening to the Mercadante.’

‘*Gran Dio!* It would scarcely be an enjoyable evening for you, my friend.’

Carlo made an expressive gesture with his shoulders.

‘Perhaps not, but I should see him and be able to judge better what to be at.’

‘You have not heard, then, of a baritone fit to step into his shoes?’

‘I have heard of one, but it is doubtful whether he will accept Merlino’s offer.’

‘What! Has it gone so far as that? Actually an offer? Come, the clouds begin to disperse! Once get that scamp ousted and your troubles are over.’

Carlo was silent. In his heart he thought they would be, not over, but just begun. He had not yet told Enrico of Piale’s little plot, for he knew that his friend would favour no plan likely to make him unhappy, and felt that he was not yet strong enough to stand arguments for the side on which he was already biased.

‘Well, I will stay the night since you ask me,’ he said at length. ‘Will you come with me to *Don Giovanni*?’

‘Yes, if you are indeed bent on going. Your presence will be commented on, though. You see it is so soon after——’ he broke off in confusion, adding, after a pause, ‘And you see everyone will be there to-night, for Madame Merlino’s first appearance has been much talked of. Your going may be misunderstood.’

‘*Che sarà sarà,*’ said Carlo, with a quick sigh. ‘Enough, I shall go; let us say no more about it.’

## CHAPTER IX

### THE OLIVE-GARDEN

‘Though one but say, “Thy will be done,”  
He hath not lost his day  
At set of sun.’—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

As Enrico had predicted, the Teatro Mercadante was crowded. Not only was it the opening night, but the Neapolitan world was curious to see the new *prima donna*, this girl of good birth

and breeding, who had outraged all the proprieties and eloped with her singing-master. Had it not been for his inward consciousness that there was something much worse that people might ere long say of his sister, Carlo could not have endured all that he was that night fated to overhear. On every side people discussed the Merlino-Donati scandal; but though he winced under it, the dread of the future deadened the recollection of the past, the new danger eclipsed the old shame.

He sat as though in a bad dream, waiting for the curtain to rise and disclose to him the face of this enemy of his peace; so engrossed was he with this thought that he scarcely heard the overture. He wanted to meet his foe face to face, and with a sort of shudder he reflected that in a very short time it was possible that he himself might be standing on that very stage whence Leporello was now descanting upon his master's vices. A moment more and Comerio—the Don Giovanni of the evening—would appear. Carlo breathed hard, drew himself together, and waited through moments which seemed like hours. Curiously enough the first sight of his foe relieved him; Comerio was not at all the ideal villain; he was a small-made, supple-looking man, with very white taper hands, and a face which at that distance looked refined—much too refined for a Don Giovanni. He sang rather well, but his acting was so execrable that Carlo forgot everything in a longing desire to substitute something lifelike for the ludicrous throwing-up of hands which seemed to be Comerio's idea of dramatic art. Never once was it possible to think of him as anything but Comerio the baritone; he walked through his part and threw about his arms very freely, that was all. And yet his complete failure as an actor was in Carlo's favour. He wanted to study the man, not to enjoy the opera, and since Comerio had no notion of throwing himself into his part, the opera was as good a time to study his own character as any other.

For a while all went well. The pretty scene in which Zerlina made her first appearance amid the crowd of merry peasants could not have been better chosen for Anita's *début*. She looked so charming, and sang so well, that she won all hearts, and even Carlo felt a thrill of pride and pleasure as he listened to her sweet, bird-like notes in the duet with Masetto, a part which was well filled by Merlino himself.

But his pleasure was of short duration. All his miserable apprehension returned the instant Comerio was on the stage again. To see him making love to Anita was more than he could endure.

Next day the newspapers were warm in their praise as to the acting in the scenes between Don Giovanni and Zerlina; but Carlo knew that this was just the one part of the opera in which there had been no attempt at acting.

The music was poisoned to him that night, and he could hardly endure the repetition of '*La ci darem*,' which roused the audience to enthusiasm. He never spoke once to Enrico, who for his part could only speculate as to his friend's feelings, for Carlo showed no other sign of agitation than a slightly heightened colour, sat out the opera, and greeted two or three friends whom they encountered afterwards quite in his usual manner. Only one thing seemed ominous, because it was unnatural, and that was his silence. It grew so burdensome as they walked home that at last Enrico broke the ice with an outspoken question, 'Well, what do you think of him?'

'I don't know—I can hardly tell—my head aches too much,' said Carlo, in a voice which betrayed so much suffering that his friend ventured no more inquiries, and was glad enough when they reached home. 'I shall think things out better to-morrow,' were his last words that night. But when the morning came he was incapable of thinking at all, and could only lie still and endure the worst headache he had ever had in his life, while, as though to torture him yet more, '*La ci darem*' rang perpetually in his ears.

On the Saturday he awoke to the consciousness that the pain was over, that his brain was clear once more, and that he must no longer postpone the decision upon which so much depended. But Frau Ritter absolutely refused to allow him to go home till the heat of the day was over; and it was not until late that he managed to escape from his kindly nurses, and, taking a boat at the Piliero, made his way home. He felt much shaken by all that he had been through, and would fain have given himself up to the refreshment of the sweet June evening, turning his back on the threatening future, and getting what pleasure he could from the beautiful bay which was so familiar and so dear to him. But something warned him that now was his time, that he was not likely again to have such uninterrupted quiet.

Resolutely he went over in his mind all that there was to be said on either side of the question. What course would Captain Britton take? Would he not justly complain of an arrangement which must indefinitely postpone his daughter's marriage? Would he not be wrathful at his choice of such a profession? And how was he to explain to him that choice

without altogether betraying Nita's story? Again, there was the profession itself. Piale thought only of the reputation he would some day gain, but Carlo, not unnaturally, thought of the reputation he would lose. He knew quite well how his friends would regard his choice; he could imagine the expression of Uncle Guido's face as he exclaimed, 'What! a Donati turn actor?'

And then there was Francesca. His breast heaved, his eyes grew dim; had it not been for the presence of the boatman he would have given way and sobbed aloud. And yet Piale was right as far as that went. Once convinced that he might really save Nita, Francesca would be the first to bid him go; once sure that he was doing what he thought right, she would bid him God-speed and bear the pain like a little heroine.

With him rested the real difficulty, the terrible decision. Was he to give her this pain to bear?

'There will be stormy weather to-night, signore,' said the boatman, turning round in his seat to glance out seawards as they rounded Posilipo.

This remark diverted Carlo's thoughts for a moment. The sea was like glass; far away in the distance he could see a yacht lying becalmed, her beautiful white sails flapping idly as she rolled.

The sunset was just over, and already the brief twilight was fading away, the summer night beginning, and after the sultry, almost breathless day, a cool wind was springing up; on the horizon could be seen the dark line which showed that a change was coming, and that the time of calm inaction was over.

Was it not like his life? He had had his days of ease, his smooth, uneventful days, with nothing to mar the tranquil happiness. Then there had arisen the dark foreboding of coming trouble, and now the storm had broken. Was he to choose this life of perpetual storm? Or might he not seek the tranquil haven where he longed to be? Must he indeed go forth into a world so uncongenial!—into a strife so distasteful?

He was not indolent by nature, he was not selfish; but he had, in a marked degree, that Italian hatred of storm and struggle which to a northern nature is so incomprehensible. To go out into a life of perpetual temptation,—a life likely to be full of provocations to the temper, this was harder to him than to most men, for he dreaded nothing so much as losing

his self-control. What if he should accept this offer, go forth as Nita's preserver, and then fail himself? In that case, indeed, all would have been lost, honour included. He could not risk all this for a mere hope, a mere chance. It could not surely be expected of a man that he should give up his home, his prospects of marriage, his profession, everything that he cared for, all for the sake of saving one woman? No, it certainly could not be expected! Why, the world would laugh at such a notion. Had any other man put such a case to him, he, too, would have smiled at it, and called the propounder of such folly a mere Quixote. How foolish the old boatman would think him if he steered his frail little boat out into the troubled waters yonder instead of making all speed to guide it to the shore!

He shivered slightly, threw his cloak across his chest, and, for the sake of a change of thought, began to abuse old Frau Ritter for having delayed his return so long, and in her dread of sunshine brought him in for the risk of malaria. But above it all floated the perverse voice which would not leave him unmolested: 'Men are not more willing to live the life of the Crucified.' He left off abusing Frau Ritter, and began to hum a song, but naturally enough chanced to begin with an air from *Don Giovanni*. The voice he longed to drown spoke more and more clearly. Well, *Don Giovanni* was poisoned for him, he must eschew it in future. And forthwith he strove to drive the unpleasant thoughts connected with it from his mind with the first snatch of song which came to his head. Out into the summer night rang the noble impassioned address of Valentino to Mephistopheles:

' *La croce dai demoni tuoi ci guarda!* '

The scene in the opera rose vividly before him, the soldier, with his cross-handled sword uplifted, boldly confronting the devil who so lately had worsted him, but who now shrank back helpless and trembling. Good heavens! and he had sought to drown the voice of God in his heart by those very words, had sought to drive back the good and to give place to the evil.

A horror of great darkness fell upon him. It was the crisis of his whole life. Afterwards, when he recalled the past anguish, he recalled with it those sombre surroundings, the purple waters, the great dark cloud drawing nearer and nearer, the hopeless gloom of the night broken only by the light on Cape Miseno and the red light on the side of the yacht. Not a sound was to be heard save the splashing of

the oars, and now and then a hoarse shout in the distance, probably the yacht's captain giving orders to his crew; but to Carlo the silence was tumult. He was sailor enough to know that in a few minutes the storm would be upon them. That mattered little, for they were close to the shore; it was the tumult in his own heart which absorbed him.

Vaguely, and as if from a great distance, he heard the boatman giving thanks to San Gennaro that they were safely in before the squall, he had indistinct recollections of paying the man a double fare and bidding him seek shelter for the night at Florestano's hut, then of plunging wildly on through the darkness, across the beach, up the hill among the dusky vines, his pain increased by a consciousness that when he had last trodden that path it had been with Francesca. Was it to be thus with his life? Must he content himself with a memory of the briefest snatch of happiness ever given to man, and toil on through long, solitary years over the rough and stony paths of publicity? It was impossible,—impossible! He rushed on yet faster, as though by rapid motion he could escape from the tyranny of an idea.

Just as he reached the olive-garden the storm suddenly broke. The wind raged over the land, tossing the trees wildly to and fro; the rain came down in torrents, the lightning cast its angry gleam across the heaving sea, and the swaying boughs, and the wet, shining shore. Carlo threw himself down on the ground, beneath the thickest of the olive-trees, seeking at once shelter from the outward storm and help in the inward struggle. He would no longer flee from the voice that had haunted him; he would listen to it—would try to understand it. What *was* the life of the Crucified?

All his soul went into the question, and the confusion within him seemed to lessen as he waited for the answer, which framed itself to him amid the raging of the wind and the dull roar of the thunder, something after this fashion.

The life of the Crucified was lived by One who delighted to do God's will. He did not exclude pleasure, or morbidly delight in pain; it was just that He did not think about pleasing Himself at all. He took the bitter and the sweet as they were sent, and delighted in them because He knew the Sender, who sought only the good of all men. This is the life of the Crucified. You think happiness is to please yourself;—it is not that at all, it is to delight in doing His will.

'Lord,' he sobbed, 'I am not willing—it is true—I am not willing to live Thy life. Save me from my selfishness!



"By Thine agony and bloody sweat, by Thy cross and passion, Good Lord, deliver me."'

He repeated the familiar words again and again, hardly conscious of what he was saying, yet in his anguish finding them a sort of relief. And, presently, either the words or his own surroundings brought to his mind what the greatest of modern atheists once termed, with an involuntary softening of the voice, 'That terrible garden-scene.' There had been a struggle—an agony—for the Son of God Himself. He, too, knew what it cost deliberately to take the course which must bring bitter grief to those who loved Him. He, too, knew how human nature shrank from isolation, from misconception. Every temptation now assailing him had also assailed the Son, who learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

And just as a child will for very awe forget its little grief when brought face to face with the great grief of its parents, so Carlo lost sight for a time of his own pain, that past scene becoming far more real to him than the bitter present. The tears wrung from him first by his own anguish fell now for another.

'Lord,' he sobbed, 'it cannot be that I am willing that Thou shouldst be crucified afresh—put to open shame—while I live here in this paradise! Anything rather than that! Lord, choose for me what Thou wilt. My spirit is willing, but my flesh is weak. "By Thine agony and bloody sweat, by Thy cross and passion, Good Lord, deliver me."'

An hour later the brief Mediterranean storm was over, the stars were shining, the yacht was on her course once more, her white sails spread to catch the softened breeze.

Then Carlo rose to his feet and went on his way.

## CHAPTER X

### THE 'PILGRIM'

'Joy, so true and tender,  
Dare you not abide?  
Will you spread your pinions,  
Must you leave our side?  
—Nay; an Angel's shining grace  
Waits to fill your place!'

A. A. PROCTER.

'VERY odd of Carlo not to come in to-day,' remarked Captain Britton from the depths of his easy-chair. 'I suppose the heat was too much for him. Have you heard from him, Fran?'

'I had a little note from him yesterday, father, only to say that he wasn't well and that the Ritters insisted on keeping him, but that he would be sure to be at home again on Saturday. I daresay Frau Ritter made him stay; it was so sultry, you know, and since Herr Ritter's illness she is always in terror of sunstrokes.'

'Well, one thing is, this thunder-storm will clear the air,' said the Captain, rubbing his large hands together contentedly. 'If I could be sure your uncle was safely in port, I should feel more comfortable, though. What did I do with his letter? Ah, here it is! "The yacht is to leave Leghorn on Wednesday," he says. They certainly ought to be at Naples by this time.'

'I looked out for the *Pilgrim* yesterday,' said Francesca, 'but to-day I forgot all about it. How I wish Clare and the girls were coming too; it was very benighted of them to like a stupid visit to the North Cape better than a cruise in the Mediterranean.'

'No accounting for tastes,' said the Captain, smiling. 'If it were not for this engagement of yours, I should feel sorely tempted to get your uncle to give me a berth. There is nothing, after all, like the sea. You smile, Fran. Why, bless your dear little heart! I wasn't wishing things otherwise with you and Carlo. On the contrary, I think the sooner you are married and settled the better for both of you. He has looked sadly worn and out of spirits lately, poor fellow!'

'There has been so much to trouble him,' said Francesca, with a sigh.

'Ay, and he is unfit to be left all alone in that dreary house. Really, I don't see why there should be any more delay. Now that he has got rid of that sister of his, why shouldn't you be married quietly and have done with it? No disrespect to the mother in that, poor soul! Why, it is the thing of all others she would have wished. I tell you what, Fran, here is such a chance as is never likely to come again. Your uncle is unexpectedly coming out here, he is sure to give at least a week to Naples—why should we not have your wedding while he is here? Upon my word!—he rubbed his hands with greater satisfaction than before—'that's the happiest notion that has come to me for a long time, Fran. You and Carlo shall be packed off on your honeymoon, Sibyl and I will console ourselves with a cruise in the *Pilgrim*, and we'll all forget that provoking Madame Merlino, who has made such a storm in a teacup.'

Francesca blushed vividly.

'If you really think—if Carlo——,' she broke off in confusion.

Captain Britton patted her head caressingly. 'Why, of course, my love, of course I would take good care that Carlo thought the suggestion his own. To prolong the engagement would be bad for both of you. Nothing in the world more trying than long engagements. Not that you are to think I am in any hurry to get rid of you ; but, after all, we shall scarcely be separated, and an engagement is somehow neither one thing nor the other. I should like to see you married, my dear ; this sad affair of poor Carlo's has been an annoyance to me—such things are unsettling, they interrupt the steady routine of daily life. I confess I shall be glad to go away for a time with your uncle, and then, later on, to come back and begin our ordinary life once more.'

Francesca felt like a cat rubbed the wrong way, but knowing that the rubber meant it all very kindly she bore it with composure.

'A cruise in the *Pilgrim* would be the best possible change for you,' she said, laughing lightly, though not altogether without an effort. 'I shall go and see if she is anywhere to be seen ; and really, since you are in such a hurry to be off, I shall have to think about my wedding-dress.'

Glad to put an end to the conversation, she crossed the room, threw open the window, and stepped out into the *loggia*. The night was deliciously fresh after the storm ; she felt an inexpressible sense of freedom and relief as she closed the window behind her, and drank in deep draughts of the cool, moist air. Though her father's words had grated upon her, there was, nevertheless, a certain amount of truth in them which she could not but recognise. She, too, had that longing to go away, to escape from the scene of all the trouble and sorrow which had lately invaded their home. It would be like escaping from the hot, lamplit drawing-room into this cool out-of-doors. And then, perhaps Carlo would begin to be himself again. Surely, though she had not liked the way in which the idea was expressed, the idea itself was a good one. They would go away,—right away from Naples, away from the region of theatres,—away from all that could recall Carlo's loss, and she would comfort him. Then, later on, they would induce Merlino to let Anita come to them ; she should stay with them at the Villa Bruno, should be made perfectly happy, should have all kinds of little English comforts which would be new and delightful to her after her wandering life. And so her

troubles should somehow conveniently disappear, and she should find that their home was her home. If her trouble was connected with money, as Francesca fancied, why then Carlo would somehow manage to clear off her debts, and she, too, should start life afresh, and they would all live happily ever after. So she dreamed in her girlish fashion, knowing nothing of the real state of the case, only fully convinced that this dreary state of things could not last for ever, that somehow it would all come right in the end like the books. And in that belief no doubt she was right; wrong only in this, that 'coming right in the end' meant to her coming right in these threescore years and ten.

To be married, perhaps, next week! How calmly her father had suggested the idea, and how her heart throbbed as she recalled his words! She would lay aside her mourning for that one day, would be dressed, spite of the sadness which had heralded in her marriage, 'as a bride adorned for her husband;' and therewith she began, after the manner of girls, to picture the dress to herself; it should be long and white and shining; and as for orange-blossom, why, there was no lack of that in the garden, always supposing this heavy rain had not dashed it. Thinking of the orange-blossom, she turned from those inward visions and looked down into the dusky mass of trees and shrubs below, starting a little at sight of someone approaching, but quickly recognising her lover.

'Carlo! why, Carlo! is it really you?' she exclaimed, an ecstasy of happiness in her voice, for she had not in the least expected him.

He looked up. She was leaning on the rail of the *loggia* among the climbing roses, her eyes bright with joy, her sweet face a little flushed, her white neck and arms gleaming through the black lace of her dress. He trembled from head to foot. It was too late now to tell her all—and had he strength to meet her? Would it not be better just to kiss that hand resting on the white balustrade, and excuse himself for the evening? But Francesca, who had never since her betrothal been so long parted from her lover, turned and flew down the steps to meet him.

'Oh, I had quite given you up, darling!' she cried. 'And are you really well again—quite well?'

A terrible pang rent his heart, but he trembled no more; all the man in him rose up to meet this sore trial.

'Quite well, *carina*; only wet through, and not fit to touch you,' he said; and by an impulse which he could hardly have

explained he checked the hands which were stealing round his neck, drew them down, and held them fast in his while he bent forward and kissed her.

A shade passed over her face. Why did he stop to think about his wet clothes? What lover ever deigned to bestow a thought on such prudent considerations?

He read her thoughts in a glance, and therewith saw a vision of the future—the shadow deepening on that dear face, the eyes dim with tears, the brow contracted with pain. To hide his agony from her he let his head droop forward, resting his burning forehead on her shoulder.

'I have been so dreadfully anxious, Carlino,' she said. 'And, oh! it is so beautiful to have you back again!'

He did not speak, only his cold hands held hers more tightly; his face was hidden on her breast. But, though he could hide from her the sight of his anguish, he could not deceive her; she knew intuitively that it was no physical pain which made a man like Carlo bow his head like one overwhelmed. It must surely be that he was thinking of his mother—and it must have been terribly dreary coming back from Naples that stormy evening—coming home for the first time to the empty house.

'My own dear one,' she said, all the deep tenderness in her heart stealing into her voice, 'you'll not shut me out from your sorrow. What is yours is mine, Carlino. I was so happy when I saw you, I forgot what a sad home-coming it must be. But, darling, it wasn't that I forgot her, for I, too, loved her.'

'Pray that I may keep my promise to her,' he whispered. 'Pray! pray!'

There was a silence. The tears welled up in Francesca's eyes, not because she understood his sorrow, but because the sorrow was his, and because she loved him. She prayed obediently like a little child. After a while he raised his head, looked for a moment into her eyes, then pressed his lips to hers in a long, lingering kiss.

'Dear love,' he said, gently, 'we will keep our Whitsuntide together.'

He watched her up the marble steps, then turned away, walking home through the wet garden paths. And even in his great sadness he could not but smile faintly as he reflected what Piale's feelings would be could he now see him, cold, and weary, and wet to the skin. 'The singer keeps his shop in his throat,' he said to himself, with a pathetic little effort to persuade himself that he was now quite accustomed

to the idea. 'I must not indulge any more in evening storms.'

The next day was Whitsunday. Carlo, as usual, drove in to Naples with the Brittons, and was very glad that the great excitement of 'Uncle George's' probable arrival excluded all other topics of conversation. It lasted throughout the drive, and, indeed, engrossed Captain Britton's thoughts so much during church-time that he was glad to effect his escape with Sibyl after the sermon, leaving Carlo and Francesca to the second service, while he hastened to make inquiries as to the *Pilgrim*.

To his surprise and delight, he was greeted just outside the church by his brother.

Sibyl, who had very vague recollections of her uncle, studied him with a child's keen criticism.

'He is like papa,' she reflected, 'but smaller and finer; his beard is beautiful, and white and curly, like a Father Christmas; he laughs with his eyes. I like him.'

Having satisfied herself on this point, she began to listen to the conversation.

'Yes, we got in early this morning,' her uncle was saying. 'We had very light winds all the way from Leghorn—in fact, yesterday we were becalmed, but after the squall we got on better. What a paradise you live in, to be sure! Ah, is this your little one? Why, Sibyl, you have grown out of all knowledge! And what have you done with Francesca?'

'Francesca will be here directly,' replied the Captain. 'We may as well wait for her, if you are not in a hurry. By the bye, George, I think you have not heard that she is to be married shortly.'

'What high and mighty nobleman has been so happy as to meet with your approval?' said Mr. Britton, well aware of his brother's weakness for titles, and convinced by his beaming face that the marriage was desirable in his eyes.

'A young Italian neighbour of ours, Signor Donati; not a noble at all, but of a good old family, and likely to do well at the Neapolitan Bar. Oh, I am thoroughly pleased with the affair—thoroughly pleased, and Donati is heir to a rich old uncle, so it is satisfactory in every way.'

'I hope he is good enough for dear little Fran,' said Mr. Britton, drily. Somehow the notion of his pretty niece marrying the first foreigner who proposed for her did not please him.

'Well, as to that, I doubt if there is any one in the world quite good enough for her,' said Captain Britton, rubbing his hands, but slightly embarrassed by the presence of his Prayer-

book. 'You will like Donati, though, I am sure of that. He is a fine fellow. Just now, poor boy, he is in great trouble—lost his mother quite suddenly, and, of course, he's dreadfully cut up. In fact, I think the only thing will be to hasten on the marriage, and get him right away from the place for a bit. Ah, here they come! that's right!' and he hurried forward lest Sibyl should forestall him as news-bearer.

Mr. Britton glanced quickly at Francesca's *fiancé*, and felt his insular prejudice melting away. A more beautiful face he had never seen. Something of its serenity vanished, however, as Captain Britton approached,—a sort of shade passed over the forehead, and he evidently came back to the present with an effort. The Captain brought him forward, and introduced him in his usual rather boisterous and patronising way. Mr. Britton was all the more struck by the grace and dignity of the Italian, and he held out his hand cordially.

'I have been hearing of you, Signor Donati,' he said, pleasantly. 'You must let me congratulate you, for, indeed, I think you are a very happy man.'

The Italian smiled, surely the saddest smile ever seen, as he bowed his acknowledgments. Mr. Britton was startled and perplexed, but Francesca's happy face reassured him, and had not the Captain said that his future son-in-law was in trouble?

'I want you all to come and spend the day on my yacht,' he said, turning to his brother. 'The gig is waiting down by the Arsenal. Come! you must really take compassion on my solitude. Signor Donati, I hope you'll put up with that barbarous custom, an early dinner; but the fact is, our cook's cuddy is so near the men's quarters that if I dine late the poor fellows are half-grilled at night.'

After a little more discussion, they all set off for the Arsenal, where the 'gig,' a term which had baffled Carlo altogether, resolved itself into a four-oared boat, manned by trim-looking English sailors, who bore the name of the *Pilgrim* in red letters across their blue jerseys, and in gold letters round their hats. Mr. Britton took his place in the stern, insisting that his brother must sit beside Sibyl to trim the boat, and, having thus managed that the lovers should be side by side, gave the word to start. Sibyl gave a cry of delight as the golden-brown oars were promptly raised in the air and simultaneously lowered into the water.

'Oh, Uncle George!' she cried, 'how happy you must be with this dear little boat always waiting for you, and men to do so beautifully just what you say!'

'Ah!' said Mr. Britton, laughing. 'Wait till you are on board the *Pilgrim*! I see,' he added, turning to Carlo and Francesca, 'that you two have already taught this little one to understand the proud sense of possession.'

Francesca smiled and blushed. Carlo appeared to be engrossed with a vessel which they were passing, the huge *Duilio*, then not quite completed.

'I suppose,' he said, turning back with a bright smile which veiled the pain at his heart, 'I suppose there is no need to introduce you to our monster vessel, you probably know much more about her than we do.'

The shipbuilder was not above appreciating the compliment thus delicately conveyed, and Francesca looked up at the unwieldy form with its dull red colour and its six funnels, and tried to seem interested in the discussion which arose upon its merits among the men; its only merit to her was that it seemed to be interesting Carlo and taking him out of himself. The *Pilgrim*, a pretty, schooner-rigged yacht, of about 150 tons, was anchored off the Military Mole, and, like all the vessels in harbour, was gaily dressed with flags in honour of the  *festa* . A somewhat smaller yacht was anchored close by.

'They tell me our neighbour the *Aida* belongs to an Italian Count or Duke, or something of the sort,' said Mr. Britton. 'What was the name, Oxenberry; do you recollect?'

'Count Carossa, I believe, sir,' said the coxswain.

'Count Carossa!' said Captain Britton, with a beaming face. 'The name seems familiar to me. A friend of yours, perhaps, Carlo?'

'No, sir; I have never even met him,' said Carlo, repressively.

'But the name is familiar to you, surely?'

'It is certainly a well-known name,' said Carlo, still in the same tone.

Mr. Britton was a little puzzled, he could not make out whether the Italian knew of something not to the credit of Count Carossa, or whether his tone merely implied a great distaste of the Captain's love of the aristocracy.

By this time they were alongside the yacht, and the Captain, forgetting all about the Count, began to admire his brother's latest toy.

'A very pretty little vessel indeed, George! I confess I envy you. Sibyl, what do you say? Shall we not sell the villa and live afloat? Now, Carlo, don't forget to take your hat off to the deck, it's a mortal insult to forget that!'



Carlo laughed ; just for a little time he forgot his cares, and his first thought, as he glanced round the deck, with its exquisitely smooth and white boards, its shining brass work, its cunningly arranged skylights and companions, was this :—

'A yacht is the last place in the world for private conversations. One more day of freedom ! One more day's peace of mind for my darling !'

As for Sibyl, she was wild with happiness, now watching the gig as it was hauled up, now trotting off hand in hand with the coxswain to the fore-castle, looking with longing eyes at the rope ladders, and chattering without intermission.

It was not without difficulty that Francesca bore her off to be washed and brushed before dinner, and had it not been for the fascinations of the shifting table in the saloon, she would hardly have been induced to stay down below for so dull a duty as eating.

'Uncle George,' she said, leaning forward in her quaint way, 'it would have been nice to come on board the *Pilgrim* any day, but being Sunday it's just perfect.'

'Eh—how's that ?' said Mr. Britton. 'The better the day the better the deed, is that your idea ?'

'No ; but don't you see on weekdays we can have games—different games every day, if we like, but Sundays are always—always the same. Now this makes such a beautiful difference. I am glad you asked us on Sunday !'

Carlo, to whom the rules of the English Sunday had always been incomprehensible, could not repress an amused smile, but he wisely avoided taking part in the discussion which ensued on modern Sabbatarianism, being, of course, ready enough to speak out his own opinion if it were asked, but not feeling bound to volunteer it. The argument was at last interrupted by the entrance of the steward.

'A boat has just come across from the *Aida*, sir, with Count Carossa's card, but the Captain can't make out what the men say, all of them being Italians.'

Carlo at once offered to act as interpreter, and ran up on deck, returning with the message, which he delivered with an impartial face.

'Count Carossa presents his compliments to the owner of the *Pilgrim*, and it would give him much pleasure to make his acquaintance. If quite convenient to Mr. Britton, the Count will call upon him in the afternoon.'

'Very happy to see him, I'm sure,' said Mr. Britton, who was the soul of hospitality. 'Perhaps, Signor Donati, you

would be so good as to frame a polite message for me and deliver it to the messenger; or stay, I'll write it on my card.'

This done, they all adjourned to the deck, where, before long, they were joined by Count Carossa, a fine-looking man of two or three-and-thirty, to whom Captain Britton took very kindly. There was much amusing discussion as to the merits of the two yachts, then of Mr. Britton's homeward route, during which the Count discovered that Francesca and her father were living in the neighbourhood, and did his best to push the acquaintance, eliciting very easily an invitation to dinner on the following Wednesday.

Carlo, after the Count's arrival, had kept sedulously in the background, and had said but little. Happening to glance at him once Mr. Britton was struck by the strange expression of his face. He hastily turned his eyes towards Francesca; she was smiling in answer to some polite speech addressed to her by the Count.

'I believe that fellow Donati is jealous!' he thought to himself. 'My poor little Fran, you are altogether too good to be left to the tender mercies of an Italian husband. I wonder if the marriage is, after all, so advisable as they seem to think.'

Afterwards, when the Count was gone, he said, casually, to Carlo,—

'By the way, Signor Donati, I suppose this Count Carossa is a decent sort of fellow; you don't know anything against him, do you?'

'Nothing whatever, sir,' said Carlo, emphatically,—'nothing whatever. I only know that he is very rich, and that he leads a wandering life; I have often heard people wonder why in the world he does not settle down.'

'Then he is unmarried?'

'Yes, he is unmarried.'

At that moment Sibyl ran up to beg Carlo to look at 'some dear little tortoises in the dinghy.' Mr. Britton nodded to himself with the air of one who has surmised rightly.

'Just as I thought,' he muttered, 'as jealous as he can be.'

The afternoon was spent in rambling about Naples, showing Uncle George as many lions as he cared to see; then they returned to the yacht to that curious English meal called 'tea,'—a new experience to Carlo, and it was arranged that they should drive home in the cool of the evening, taking Mr. Britton with them.

'It has been such a delightful day,' said Francesca; 'I

think I agree with Sibyl that being a Sunday it has been all the nicer.'

The lovers were standing near the wheel in the dim starlight; perhaps Carlo was glad that the light was no clearer.

'See,' he said, 'there is Venus just setting; not there; look, out yonder behind St. Elmo.'

Francesca was just in time to see the last of the planet; after it was set, the Castle on its lofty height seemed to stand out more darkly against the evening sky. The harbour was very quiet, but from the shore came sounds of laughter and merriment, a confused roar of many voices, and now and then in the distance a line or two of Garibaldi's hymn floating on the wind.

'How still and peaceful we are out here!' said Francesca, 'and how noisy and horrid it seems in Naples. Why does a Babel like that always sound so wicked, I wonder? It makes me think of Vanity Fair in the *Pilgrim's Progress*.'

'And yet through the uproar we can make out Garibaldi's hymn,' said Carlo.

'Ah,' she said, laughing, 'I know you would like to be in the thick of it all, fighting against the evil as your father and grandfather fought in their day. Oh, Carlino, what a good thing for me that there are no battles now!'

'Yet in a good cause you would not have hindered me, I think, *carina*? Tell me,' his lips trembled,—'tell me, had we lived then would you have begged me to stay at home?'

'No, Carlo *mio*,' she said, raising her sweet eyes to his; 'I would have told you to go and help your country; I wouldn't have cried till you were out of sight.'

They were interrupted by a summons to get into the gig, and the four trim-looking sailors rowed them swiftly across the quiet harbour, the only sound being an occasional '*Qui va la?*' from the watchman on board one of the anchored vessels, and a ringing reply from the coxswain of 'Yacht's boat.'

'The peace of my life is over,' thought Carlo, as he glanced back across the quiet waters to the *Pilgrim* with her golden harbour light; 'now for Vanity Fair.'

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## CHAPTER XI

## A FIRST ENCOUNTER

'Blest, too, is he who can divine  
Where real right doth lie,  
And dares to take the side that seems  
Wrong to man's blindfold eye.

Then learn to scorn the praise of men,  
And learn to lose with God ;  
For Jesus won the world through shame,  
And beckons thee His road.'—FABER.

'I HAVE something to say to you, *carina* ; let us linger behind the others ; there is no hotter place on earth than these streets of Pompeii, and I think we know them well enough.'

The whole party had driven over early on the Monday morning to show Mr. Britton the more recent excavations ; he had been to Pompeii before, but many years ago.

To Carlo and Francesca, however, those old grey streets and ruined temples were perfectly familiar, and Francesca was not sorry to follow out Carlo's suggestion, and despatched Sibyl to tell the others that they would wait in the Temple of Venus till their return.

'At which message you may be sure Uncle George will laugh,' she said. 'Had we been wise in our generation, Carlo, we should have chosen the Temple of Isis, but then this is my favourite, and, after all, we are proof against teasing now.'

Carlo smiled sadly, as he looked across the beautiful expanse of country. On one side, beyond the ruined streets, lay the verdant *Campagna* bounded by Vesuvius and Somma ; on the other was a yet more lovely view of sea and mountains, with the white houses of Castellamare gleaming in the sunshine.

'We have not chosen a very shady place,' said Francesca. 'But, see, there is just a little patch of shadow down there. Let us come.'

'Do you know what that is?' said Carlo, repressing a shudder.

'Why, yes, to be sure,' she replied gaily ; 'it's the altar of sacrifice. How fond Clare used to be of poking about in here—don't you remember ? I wish she had come with Uncle George.'

'And I, too ; I would have given anything to have had her here—for your sake, *carina*.'

There was something so unusual in his tone that Francesca looked up quickly.

'Carlo *mio*, you frighten me! What do you mean? Don't lean on the altar like that! Come and sit down on this step by me in the shade. Why do you wish Clare here for my sake? What do I really want with any one now that I have you?'

'But if, as we were saying last night, there was a battle to fight and I had to leave you?'

'Carlino! what do you mean? Surely there is not going to be a revolution—a war?'

'Oh, no, it is much tamer than that,' he said, with a slightly bitter smile. Then, a sudden light illumining his face, he put his arm round her and held her closely.

'My dear one,' he said, speaking rapidly and with great earnestness,—‘my own true love, you gave me fresh courage last night by your words. *Carina*, there are other wars than those between nations; there is the great war in which you and I have vowed our service; you would not wish me, I know, to prove coward in that—to be a deserter. I must tell you, in plain words, the actual case, even though it is hard to do it,—even though I would give the world to keep all knowledge of such evil from you. Francesca, do you know what killed my mother? I will tell you. It was the knowledge that Anita was living in hourly peril of proving unfaithful to her husband! He—that one who would ruin her—that one who dares to call his foul passion by the name of love, is actually a member of Merlino's company. Merlino himself suspects nothing, if he did he would half kill Anita. I have thought of every possible plan for getting rid of this villain without betraying my sister; but, darling, there is only one way that will answer, and it is this: to get rid of this man—this baritone—I must take his place myself.'

'You must offer,' said Francesca, faintly; 'but perhaps Signor Merlino will not accept you.'

'The post has already been offered to me by Merlino, and on Wednesday, Francesca *mia*, I must let him know whether I accept his offer or not.'

'Ah!'

She locked her hands together convulsively, but only that one sob of intense, intolerable pain escaped her.

There was silence—a silence so deep that the distant sounds of the workmen busy over the excavations seemed quite near. A little lizard darted across the pavement close to their feet, and plunged into the maidenhair that fringed the altar.

Francesca opened her eyes.

'My love! my love!' she cried, 'don't look like that! See, Carlo *mio*, I am going to keep my word. I will say, like the wives in the old days, "Go and help," and I'll not cry; I promise you I'll not cry. And yet—yet—oh! how can I help it when you set me so bad an example?'

With a stifled sob she broke off and hid her face on his breast. The sight of her suffering had unnerved him, but quickly he regained that strange self-mastery which was all the more remarkable because it was combined with an ardent, emotional, highly-strung temperament.

'You are helping me to keep my word,' he said, drawing her yet closer to him. 'As a child I promised my father on his death-bed that I would shield Nita, and my mother's last entreaty you heard.'

'Do I help you?' she said, eagerly; 'do I really help? Then I am no longer unhappy. It was the thought of your going quite away where I could do nothing—*nothing* for you—it was that broke my heart. If, even away, I can help you—if even in this we can work together—then I can bear it.'

'Your father,' he said, hesitatingly, 'I must tell him at once,—and, *carina*, he will not see things in the light you see them.'

'He will not approve of your going on the stage,' said Francesca. 'He will be vexed and annoyed, but he cannot help seeing that it is the only thing to be done.'

Carlo made a faint gesture of dissent. The last sentence was so like Francesca, so unlike the Captain.

'He will most naturally wish that I had never spoken to you. Indeed, I myself could almost wish it, darling; for what have I brought you but trouble, and grief, and the shadow of a disgrace?'

'You have brought me yourself, Carlino,' she said, with a sweet mirthfulness in look and tone; 'you don't seem to think much of the gift, it is true.'

'And yet if I had kept silence a week longer all would have been different. I should have gone off with Merlino's company and there would have been no discussion and remonstrance; I should not have vexed your father—should not have felt that I had spoiled your life. You would have been free, and the pain would have been mine alone.'

'Why, you vain boy!' she exclaimed, half laughing, half crying, 'do you think it was that tale you told me in the belvedere that made me love you? You know quite well I have loved you for years and years! And then you talk of

going away in silence and leaving me free and happy. Carlino, I'm ashamed of you !'

Like two children, they forgot for a little while the dark future, and basked in the sunny present. Parting was a thought hardly to be conceived while they sat together in the old Temple of Venus, and made love to each other after the fashion of lovers in all ages and climes.

After a time they talked of Carlo's future life, he spoke warmly of Sardoni, quoted Piale's high opinion of Marioni, the conductor, and said all that could be said in Merlino's favour. He wanted to paint his new life in bright colours for her sake, and he talked cheerfully of winning Nita's love and confidence, speaking with more assurance than he really felt.

And yet Francesca remembered well enough his words a few weeks before about the wretched, roving life of a singer, and she knew that in his heart he shrank from it still.

'Shall you be in Italy, do you think ?' she asked.

'No,' replied Carlo, with a sigh. 'Merlino will only stay here till he has got his chorus together again, and given his principals a short holiday. You see things are different here, travelling companies are not much in vogue.'

'Then, where will you be ?'

'In England for a time, then in America.'

'America !' she could not repress the exclamation. 'That will seem terribly far away—I hoped, as they had just come back, there would be no question of going there again.'

'America is the great field for companies like Merlino's ; I suppose a great deal of my life will probably be spent there.'

Francesca sighed.

'Ah, well, after all it is chiefly in imagination that distance affects one—our letters will travel just as well across the Atlantic. You will have to send me all your changes of address, Carlino ; and, as for me, I shall have to learn to write smaller, or there will never be space enough for all I shall have to say.'

By the time the rest of the party joined them, they had grown accustomed to the thought of the change—had bravely faced the coming separation, each strengthening the other to endure ; and Mr. Britton little guessed, as he gaily teased his niece about her indifference to the new discoveries, what had passed during that hour in the Temple of Venus. Francesca only smiled and drew him into a description of all they had seen, while with her eyes she followed rather wistfully the lithe figure running with Sibyl down the steep old street which led

out of Pompeii. They lunched in the little restaurant at the entrance; allowed Mr. Britton to be inveigled into the region of photographs, bronzes, and lava ornaments; then, in the cool of the afternoon, drove home again, Francesca nursing a 'Dying Gladiator' in terra-cotta, which was to go home to Clare in the *Pilgrim*.

If Captain Britton thought Carlo rather more silent than usual he put it down to constraint in the presence of a stranger, —the last thing Carlo would have been likely to experience. However, the worthy Captain liked him all the better for it, and talked to him in his bland, semi-patronising way, chaffing him not a little on his light-hearted compatriots who thronged the road in their *fiesta* clothes, closely packed in open carriages.

'Yes, yes; you Neapolitans are terrible pleasure-lovers,' he said, laughingly. 'Look there, now—ten people stowed away in that, and the horses all decked out with brass ornaments and bells; and yet they are people of the lower class, who, likely enough, will be hungry to-morrow!'

Francesca fully expected that the term, 'lower class,' would call forth a remonstrance from Carlo, but he let it pass, and the next moment she understood why. His eye had been caught by a poster on one of the walls of Portici in which Madame Merlino's name appeared in large letters.

Carlo was invited to dine at the Casa Bella that evening; he had not yet made up his mind whether he would tell all to Captain Britton face to face, or whether he would write him a letter. Though a very fluent speaker, he was not particularly fond of writing English, however; and if only a favourable opportunity could be found he rather inclined to an interview with the Captain.

The opportunity came. Dessert was over, Francesca had left the room, Mr. Britton excused himself soon after, as he had a great number of letters to write; the Captain drew his chair up to the table again and passed the wine to his guest. Carlo knew then that his time was come; the hand with which he helped himself to some trembled a little, but his voice was firm and well modulated when he spoke.

'It seems a little ungracious to be glad that Mr. Britton's holiday should be invaded by business letters,' he began, 'but I particularly wanted a few words alone with you.'

Captain Britton thought of his scheme for hastening on the marriage, and quite hoped that the same idea had occurred to Carlo. A kindly smile played about his broad mouth.



'I, too, have wanted to speak with you all day, but these family parties are no time for confidential talk.'

Carlo thought of the Temple of Venus, and was silent. Captain Britton resumed:—

'The fact is, I am anxious about you, my dear fellow; you look to me far from well. I wish that sister of yours was at the other side of the Atlantic, and that's the truth of it; it was a bad day for all of us when she returned. When do they leave Naples? You'll never be yourself again till you are rid of that brother-in-law.'

'I am not likely to be rid of him for some time to come, I fear,' said Carlo, plunging boldly into his subject. 'It is about the step which I purpose taking that I wish now to speak to you.'

Did he mean to propose that wedding journey which the Captain had planned? His face was grave almost to sternness, but then the Merlino's were quite enough to account for that.

'I know it is a step which you will disapprove,' resumed Carlo. 'And yet—there is no help for it—take it I must.'

Captain Britton's hopes sank; he began to think apprehensively of all the things he should least like to happen.

'Well, short of turning Romanist again,' he said, after a pause, 'I don't think anything you are likely to do would disquiet me very much.'

'It will, however, delay our marriage,' said Carlo; 'that is, I fear, quite inevitable.'

'Well, well,' said Captain Britton, thinking that he meant to study for some of the higher branches of the law, 'you are both young, and I can assure you I'm in no hurry to get rid of my little Francesca. Have you discussed the matter with her?'

'Yes, and she agrees with me that I must go.'

'Go! Where?'

'With Merlino's company; it is the only way in which I can keep my promise to my mother—the only possible way of shielding Anita.'

Captain Britton was so much startled that for a minute he could not speak, only the colour rose to his forehead and his eyes opened wider. In all his trouble and anxiety Carlo could not help observing that he bore a comical resemblance to the crimson shade over the lamp, with its owl's head and round, staring eyes. How was he to make this man, of all men in the world, understand Nita's position and sympathise with its difficulties? While he hesitated how best to put her

case without divulging too much, the Captain recovered his breath.

'Do I understand that you mean to turn actor?' he asked in a sort of hoarse roar.

Tone and manner were alike overbearing.

Carlo made one of his dignified little bows and said gravely, 'Merlino has offered me reasonable terms, and Piale has long wished that I should go on the stage. Had I only my own wishes to consult I should certainly not choose the career of a public singer; but, sir, I promised my mother to shield Anita, and I must do my best—I must think of her.'

'I should have thought you were bound to think of your promised wife,' said the Captain, wrathfully, 'to consult her wishes.'

'Francesca agrees with me,' said Carlo; 'she would never keep me back from a duty.'

'Francesca is a fool, then. Duty, indeed! A duty to mix yourself up with a set of idle, profligate fellows! A duty to pander to the taste of the dissolute, and play the buffoon on the stage, and be clapped by all the scum of the town!'

Carlo by a great effort strangled the words of angry remonstrance which rose to his lips, and tried to understand the feelings of an Englishman with Puritan traditions. He would at least try to explain the state of affairs patiently.

'It is very hard for me to understand the view you take of the stage, sir,' he began; 'we Italians honour and respect our theatre; it is not, as you would say, the haunt of the dissolute, but the resort of the whole people——'

The Captain interrupted him, he was all the more angry because his companion had managed, so far, to exercise a well-bred restraint. Some devil prompted him to rouse the Italian's latent passion.

'Yes,' he said, sneeringly, 'I know your national tendencies well enough, but I had thought you were superior to your countrymen. I see I was wrong; you are as frivolous and pleasure-seeking as the rest of the lot; it was well said of you Italians that you were only fit for artists' models and the operatic stage.'

Carlo sprang to his feet, fire flashing from his eyes.

'No man is called on to sit still and hear his country insulted,' he cried. 'The words are not worthy of you, sir; I am sure you will retract them.'

'If I retract them in part I certainly still apply them to you,' said Captain Britton. 'What have you proved yourself but fickle and frivolous? You have altogether deceived me.'

His patriotic feelings somewhat soothed, Carlo grew a little calmer, the personalities were less intolerable. Again he made an effort patiently to put before the Captain the whole case; this time he was determined that he would make him fully comprehend it and hear it out.

'You condemn me, sir, before you have grasped the situation,' he began, his voice so subdued by the strong restraint he was putting on himself that it sounded low and monotonous. In words plain enough to make the Englishman wince he briefly described the dilemma. 'Knowing this,' he went on,— 'knowing, too, that my mother trusted to me to avert the danger, you surely cannot judge me harshly for taking this step. I knew the stage was dishonourable in your eyes, but I thought you would see in time that for me it was a necessity.'

The Captain had risen, too, and was pacing the room with quick, irritated steps. Nita's story had been a severe shock to him, Carlo's plain-speaking still caused his ears to tingle, and the thought of any sort of connexion with a family on the borders of such a scandal was unbearable to him. He had a just pride in his Britton ancestry, in his honest, God-fearing forefathers; his strong love of family, his sense of kinship, was the best part of the man. But virtues generally have their corresponding vices, and the Captain had an overweening idea of his own dignity, and a habit of looking on other men's affairs from a lofty height, which often made his judgment faulty.

He was blind now to Carlo's unselfishness, blind to his pain, he struck out remorselessly, thinking only how to rescue Francesca from further connexion with Madame Merlino's brother.

'Don't talk to me of duty and necessity,' he thundered; 'you are a Jesuit in disguise, you are doing evil that good may come, if, indeed, there is any thought of good in the whole plan. My own belief is that you are tired of Francesca. If so you couldn't have set to work better. I shall certainly not give my daughter in marriage to an actor; you may consider your betrothal at an end.'

For a minute the blow seemed to crush the very life out of Carlo, he turned deathly white. Twice he made as though he would speak, twice failed in the attempt, his lips refusing to frame the words. Captain Britton felt a pang of regret as he saw the result of his own work, but the regret was soon swallowed up in wrathful recollections.

'I don't think you in your heart believe all that you say of

me, sir,' said Donati, struggling even now to make excuse for Francesca's father. 'All I can do is to bow to your decision. You will let me see Francesca?'

Something in his patient dignity, in his manly forbearance, struck a hard blow at the Captain's pride. What a contrast there was between his own behaviour and the behaviour of the Italian! The thought chafed him, and called forth a burst of passionate anger.

'I shall not dream of permitting you to see her,' he cried furiously. 'I'll have no more of your kissing and caressing for my daughter, you'll have enough of that at the theatre. Keep your caresses for the *prima donnas*!'

In an instant Carlo's whole bearing altered, the burning colour rushed to his cheeks, his eyes blazed, all his pent-up wrath burst forth like a volcano. For an Italian nature is not unlike the Mediterranean itself; people are tempted to presume on that calm, blue peacefulness which looks as if it could never be broken, and then they find themselves suddenly overtaken by one of its sharp, characteristic storms; and, just in the same way, they presume on the infinite patience and the sweet nature of those Southerners whose only wish it has seemed to please, and are amazed when they find that sensitiveness and delicacy of perception has two sides.

Captain Britton had at length exhausted even the patience and courtesy of an Italian; he was alarmed now at the storm he had evoked.

Carlo's English had forsaken him, his voice, so subdued a minute before, was now eager and passionate, his gesticulations were vehement as he poured forth a torrent of angry remonstrance, a storm of words so rapidly uttered that to foreign ears they were hardly intelligible.

The Captain was only conscious of two things: that he deserved this burst of indignation, and that he must somehow get rid of his fiery guest. At such a moment, and in such agitation, he was not likely to weigh his words. At length Carlo paused for a moment, not because his wrath had cooled, but because his breath failed him. The Captain instantly snatched at his advantage.

'I will at least save my child from further contact with a deceiver!' he exclaimed hoarsely. 'She is mine, and I owe it to her to shield her from such as you.' They were words which could never be forgotten,—words which in their cruel injustice would rankle like a poisoned arrow. The same white-heat of passion which causes daily murders in the

Santa Lucia district leapt now to Carlo's brain, yet through it all he was conscious of a voice in his heart which said, 'Go, go at once while you can control your limbs. Go while there is yet time.'

The habit of a lifetime prevailed; to turn and leave his foe was to him more bitter than death, but with a struggle worthy of his brave progenitors, he obeyed the voice, and strode out of the room without a word.

He did not dare to pause for a moment, lest he should see Francesca, or perhaps hear her voice in the distance and be overcome. With hurried steps he crossed the vestibule, snatched up his hat from the stand, flung his coat across his chest, and closed the door of Casa Bella behind him. Then he stopped for a minute, suddenly conscious that he felt sick and giddy, and that he was still trembling with passion. The fiend whom he had worsted assailed him in a new form.

'You treated him with great forbearance,' it argued; 'you proved yourself his superior in every way. He ought to apologise to you for what he said.'

Carlo walked slowly home. The idea of bringing the Englishman to his feet and making him crave pardon soothed him a little. 'This anger shall not get the mastery of me,' he said to himself. 'I will go in and make my preparations for leaving home just as if this had not happened.'

And, with the sort of unreal strength which anger gives, he actually did begin his sorrowful task, called the servants together, told them that he was leaving Italy, paid them their wages, and dismissed them. Then, more tried by the sight of their grief and surprise than he had fancied would be the case, he sat down to his desk and began to write letters. There was the lease of the Villa Bruno to be disposed of, it was his for another year; he wrote to a house-agent in Naples. There was the furniture to be sold; he wrote to an auctioneer, asking that an early date might be fixed for the sale. At any other time these letters would have cost him much to write, but now he felt little, for fierce anger crowded out grief and regret. He had not in the least realised that he was never again to see Francesca; he could realise nothing but that he had been insulted,—grossly insulted, by the man who should have been his best friend. And yet, though he was still beside himself with passion, he was all the time aware of an inner voice urging him to forgive. The idea made him laugh scornfully as he directed and stamped his envelopes. What! was he to forgive one so clearly in the wrong? He had never before felt the

difficulty of forgiving, being naturally generous and sweet-tempered ; but Captain Britton had wounded him too deeply. Words which might have been pardoned in a mere acquaintance, seemed unpardonable in a friend who had known him from boyhood. The recollection of them sent another of those maddening bursts of fury through his frame. He pushed back his chair and began to pace the room, wrestling with the demon of fierce hatred which possessed him. For Francesca's sake he could have forgiven her father almost anything, but so gross an insult to his love—the love which he knew to be pure, and sacred, and unblamable—was surely beyond forgiveness.

It was only slowly and by degrees that he began to reap the fruits of his brave struggle for self-mastery. He grew a little calmer, and turned from the torturing recollection of the insult to an inward picture of Captain Britton himself. Almost dispassionately he began to consider that big, broad, massive figure, that bluff, weather-beaten face, with its calculating, far-seeing eyes and wide mouth. Genial and friendly as he had hitherto thought the Captain to be, he had never given him credit for much refinement of feeling ; he had known well enough that the Englishman found it very hard to make allowance for anything outside his own circle ; he had long been fain to admit in his own heart what he would never have admitted, even to Enrico Ritter, that there was in Francesca's father a slight, but unmistakable vein of vulgarity. It was, then, only too natural that the Captain should fail to understand the present state of things, and, so failing, should supply hideous motives for so unaccountable a step. Oh, yes, it was natural enough. He ought to have been prepared for it. But the perception of this brought him no nearer to forgiveness.

The night was now far advanced, but sleep was out of the question in his present state. He began to roam through the house, considering what things he should save from the sale ; some were too precious to be lost, and must be left to Enrico's keeping ; some were small enough to be reserved as souvenirs of home, to be taken away on his wanderings. Going up to his bedroom, his eye fell at once upon his father's sword, which hung above the mantelpiece, and beneath it a childish device of his own—a golden shield, and upon it, in red letters, the name of each battle in which the sword had been used. 'Aspromonte,' in larger letters curving up to the left and right to meet the shape of the shield, shone out conspicuously.

'I'll not be parted from that,' he said to himself, a thrill of loving reverence passing through him and killing the anger

and hatred. 'I shall, perhaps, need a sword in my stage wardrobe, and so, after all, this will be needed to protect Nita. It would seem like desecration to the Captain to use it on the stage, yet it will surely be my own fault if it is less honourable than at Aspromonte.'

His thoughts wandered back to that last vividly remembered scene beside his father's death-bed, and a glow of eager devotion warmed his heart as he pledged himself anew to keep that promise, to go forth bravely as the knights of old in defence of the weak and the tempted, to live the life of the Crucified.

Then, like lightning, it suddenly flashed upon him how grievously he had failed. Self had started to the front even in his self-sacrifice; he had borne but a few strokes from the enemy, and at the first personal insult had thrown down his colours; reviled, he had reviled again; suffering, he had threatened; wounded, he had sought to wound. In anguish he remembered that flood of scathing words, that fiery retort which had escaped him; and yet there was One who had borne the worst possible insults in strong silence, and he had vowed that he would live His life! Instead, he had suffered himself to be overcome by an unjust judgment, to be maddened by a few words spoken by a man who had also yielded to the same devil of pride and anger. How was he to face the difficulties of life in Merlino's company when at the very outset his temper had betrayed him? In bitter grief and self-reproach he had to learn, as all of us have to learn, that 'We must be humbled utterly in our own conceits before we can be peacemakers.'

After a while, he was seized with that strong desire to start afresh which comes to every wounded soldier, whether he fights in the legions of the Seen or the Unseen. His share of the wrong must first be set right; that was as clear as it was hard. He doubted if he could bring himself to do it, but he went so far as to go down to the *salotto*, take out his desk, and sit down with pen and paper before him. And at length, just as faint golden streaks appeared in the horizon heralding the day, the letter was finished and the struggle over.

Carlo could not rest till he had done all that could be done, so he went out into the cold dawn, and, making his way to the Casa Bella, dropped his missive in the letter-box. Then, when all was over, when he knew that for the last time he was leaving the house which contained all that he loved, his desolation suddenly broke upon him. Wrath had stilled grief, but now that his anger had passed Grief claimed him for her

own. His betrothal was at an end; Francesca was no longer his; even a farewell was denied him. With heart-broken wonder he marvelled how it was that only now did he fully take in the idea. What was Captain Britton? What were all the insults in the world before the one bitter, desolating fact that he was parted from his love?

How he got home he never knew, but he vaguely remembered finding his way to his own room, and seeing through a mist the sword and the red letters of 'Aspromonte' beneath. Then, in his great anguish, he had cried aloud, 'Strengthen me, O God! that I, too, may be faithful till death.'

But, afterwards, all was a blank, and when he came to himself the sun was far above the horizon, and he was lying at full length upon the floor, feeling stiff, and sore, and bruised.

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## CHAPTER XII

### A TROUBLED NIGHT

'Ah, Love! but a day,  
And the world is changed!  
The sun's away,  
And the bird estranged;  
The wind has dropped,  
And the sky's deranged;  
Summer has stopped.'—R. BROWNING.

FRANCESCA kept up bravely all through the long hours of that Whitsun Monday; at dinner she talked a little more than usual to cover Carlo's silence, but it was hard work, and she gave a sigh of relief when at length the ordeal was over, and she was free to go away alone. Carlo stood up to open the door for her, and as she passed him she looked up into his eyes and smiled; but once within the friendly shelter of the drawing-room her own filled with tears. She would have given much to run up to her room and have a good cry; that was out of the question, however, for she could not plead a headache when by doing so she should lose Carlo's good-night. The sound of the dining-room door opening made her beat a hasty retreat from the lamplight; she stood in the shade, and made as though she were looking out of the window, while she hurriedly dried her eyes, for not for the world would she have been caught crying. Mr. Britton, coming into the



room, descried the slim figure in its black lace dress, and came towards her.

'My sweet Fran,' he said, 'if you will not think me the laziest old uncle in the world, I am going to bid you good-night. Here is a budget of letters which I shall get through better in my own room.'

'Must you really see to them now?' she said. 'Why, it is not half a holiday if business follows you out here.'

Something in her voice made him look at her more attentively. He saw that she was in trouble, recollected that Carlo had scarcely spoken to her through dinner, and very naturally leapt to the conclusion that there had been a quarrel between the lovers.

'I have a long letter from Kate, which perhaps you'll like to see,' he said. 'She and Clare seem getting on grandly at the North Cape. They know nothing of your betrothal. May I tell them the news when I answer this?'

'I think I will tell them myself,' she said, her colour deepening a little. 'I will put in a line to-morrow, if I may.'

The tears welled up into her eyes again; she turned hastily and drew his attention to the distant view of Vesuvius with crimson flame leaping up, and summer lightning brightening the sky in the background. But Mr. Britton was too fond of her to be put aside; he began to feel really anxious about her future. 'Dear little niece,' he said, gently, 'you must forgive an old uncle's anxiety, but are you quite happy in your betrothal? Are you quite sure that you have chosen the happiest life?'

'I am sure that I have chosen the only man in the world whom I could love,' she said, recovering herself, and looking up into her uncle's face with such a sweet, bright, loveliest smile that he could only inwardly protest that no man living was worthy of her.

'Yet something is troubling you to-night?' he said, uneasily.

'Yes,' she said, her lips quivering; 'there is something troubling Carlo; he is going to talk it over with father, and—and I am not quite sure how father will take it.'

Mr. Britton looked grave.

'Dear child, of one thing you may at least be sure,' he said, gently; 'your father cares for nothing but your happiness.'

The words fitted in only too well with her own forebodings.

'Oh, why will people think of nothing but that?' she exclaimed. 'What is happiness to me when Carlo is in the question? Uncle'—she looked up at him appealingly—

'promise me that whatever happens you will never think him to blame;—there are things no outsider can understand. Promise me that you will always be his friend.'

'Well, he must be a cold-hearted person who could refuse such a petition from such lips,' he said, stooping to kiss her. 'Don't be unhappy, dear little Fran; there never yet was a betrothal which was all sunshine. Wait a little, and your clouds will disperse. Nine o'clock! I must be off to my desk.'

'I will send up your coffee, then. Good-night,' said Francesca, feeling a little comforted at having enlisted such a helper as Uncle George on Carlo's side.

She sat down near the lamp, and unfolded her cousin's letter, trying hard to feel some interest in the account of the voyage, and the midnight sun, and the adventures which always seemed to occur to anyone who travelled with Clare. But it would not do; the words conveyed nothing to her mind; she could only listen for the sound of approaching steps, for the long delay made her feel certain that Carlo was at that moment telling her father of his decision.

At length, after what seemed to her a very long time, she heard the dining-room door sharply opened and closed, then quick steps crossing the vestibule. She listened breathlessly, and, by a sudden impulse, started to her feet, but the next instant she sank down again almost as though someone had struck her, for she had heard the front door closed, and knew that her father must have forbidden Carlo to see her again.

After that she felt no inclination to cry, only a sense of cold and wretchedness,—a dull, aching misery. She sat crouched up on the sofa, still holding Kate's letter in her hand. Presently the clock struck ten, and the study bell was sharply rung. In a minute Dino appeared at the drawing-room door.

'Captain Britton is very busy, signorina,' said the old butler, 'and does not wish to be disturbed again to-night. He would be much obliged if the signorina would read prayers.'

The good old servant had no idea how much he conveyed to his young mistress in that commonplace message. The words cut her to the heart, but with the true womanly instinct to hide her wounds, she stood up quickly and said in her usual voice, 'Very well, Dino; bring in the books, then.'

And steadily she went through the usual form, her voice never once faltering, nor did she give way till the door of her own room was safely locked, and she was alone for that night of doubt, and suspense, and grief.

Meanwhile Captain Britton was not much happier than the two lovers whose separation he had decreed. He felt as soon as he had dismissed Dino that he had done a cowardly thing; but the thought of meeting Francesca that night, or of reading prayers in his present frame of mind, was more than he could endure.

At heart the Captain was a kind man; he would have liked to please all with whom he came in contact, if only they would be pleased in his own way; but to have his plans crossed, to be disappointed in any matter upon which he had set his heart, was too much for so proud a temper to bear.

Nor could he at all understand Carlo's knight-errantry. That a brother under the circumstances should be beside himself with anger, should afterwards give the traitor a good horsewhipping, or even challenge him—this he could have understood and approved; but the quiet surrender of home, country, profession, and personal happiness, in the hope of preventing the evil, this was altogether beyond him.

The Captain liked well enough to do a good action, but it must be an action that would be approved of men; nothing would have induced him to take a line that would expose him to censure; if he did a generous thing he would take good care that it should win him the pleasant and cheering approval of his friends and acquaintance.

And yet, in spite of his anger with Carlo's Quixotic scheme, he was too kind-hearted a man not to regret the harsh and wholly unjustifiable words which had escaped him in the heat of the moment. Keen shame made the colour mount to his forehead as he remembered that he had insulted a guest at his own table. The thought of this troubled him more than anything. It haunted him all through the night. He regretted deeply the pain he must give to Francesca; he felt bitterly disappointed that the marriage should now be out of the question; he was still indignant with Carlo's blind foolishness in going on the stage: but everything faded into insignificance before the one great regret,—a regret which would follow the Captain to his grave,—that for once in his life he had been guilty of a breach of hospitality.

If sleep refused to visit either Carlo or Francesca that night, it was equally cruel to Captain Britton. He tossed and turned till the bed-clothes were in a state of chaotic confusion; he tried the window open, he tried the window shut, he tried a light, he tried total darkness, he paced the room, he counted alternate black and white sheep going

through a gate, he ate bread, he smoked a cigar,—in fact, he tried all the remedies for sleeplessness he had ever heard of.

At last he gave up all thoughts of rest for that night, and began to wonder how his neighbour was faring; the young Italian's face haunted him. Now he saw him boyish, eager, and impulsive, coming nearly five years ago to tell of his love for Francesca, and receiving his sentence of probation with an odd mixture of hope, despair, and courtesy. Again he recalled the day—only three weeks ago in reality, though it seemed more like three months—when Sibyl had run down to find him in the olive-garden, bearing that significant card with the words, 'Avvocato Carlo Poerio Donati,' which conveyed to him so much. He remembered hastening back to the house, and could see again in imagination the bright look of hope which had flashed like sudden sunshine over Carlo's face when he had told him to go and find Francesca in the belvedere. And then, lastly, and most vividly of all, he recalled that face as he had last seen it. Such anger once seen is never forgotten; and the Captain knew that so generous and sweet-tempered a man must have been almost maddened by pain before his face could have worn that look of vindictive fury, before his eyes could have blazed with the fierce glow that recalled to him the eyes of a wounded lion. Had the Captain been a coward, or even a man with highly-strung nerves, he would have trembled before such a look, for to meet such eyes is to look death in the face. But, with all his faults, he was a staunch, brave-hearted Englishman, and all that he had felt was a great surprise when the fierce gleam had suddenly died away, and Carlo had turned sharply round on his heel and left him without a word.

He wondered what had happened to him afterwards, and began to feel troubled as he remembered the desolateness of the Villa Bruno.

Only a fortnight had passed since the gentle Signora Donati had been laid in her grave; he had forgotten all that when in sudden wrath he had driven her son away. Bitterly did he now repent the unkindness. Had he been an imaginative man, he would have conjured up a tragic ending to that night's work, and have suffered yet more; but, luckily, he was not of an imaginative turn, so he was only vaguely and increasingly miserable.

Then he began to think of poor little Francesca, doomed through his angry command never to see her lover again. No; at least he would yield on that point, he would go to see Carlo

after breakfast, would apologise to him for his hastiness, and permit him to come once more to the Casa Bella and take leave of Francesca. This idea gave the poor Captain a little relief, but he groaned aloud as he thought of all the grief in store for his child.

At length he heard the welcome sounds of life in the house. The night was over ; Rosetta was banging the door-mat vigorously against the porch ; Dino was tramping up and down the marble passages, fetching and carrying. Presently there was the refreshing sound of the rap at his door, and the servant's familiar summons, 'Half-past seven, signore, and a fine morning.'

The Captain rose more promptly than usual, unlocked his door, and took in his hot-water can ; on the lid there lay an envelope directed to him in Carlo's handwriting. He tore it open with a sense of sickening anxiety.

What was it that brought a sudden mist before his eyes ? Only a short, manly letter,—a letter of apology from the man whom he had wronged.

Carlo had forestalled him, and the letter which had cost the writer so much cost the reader yet more. There was very little in it, with its careful English and neat foreign writing ; but the words had come straight from the heart, and they went straight as an arrow to the heart of the Captain.

The Brittons, though so long resident in Italy, kept English hours and breakfasted all together at eight o'clock.

The Captain came down that morning with a curiously guilty feeling. Francesca was in the dining-room before him, apparently absorbed in coffee-making. He glanced at her anxiously, and saw that she was pale and worn, and looked as if she had cried till she could cry no longer. She felt her father's anxious glance and winced beneath it. Uncle George, with more tact, made as though he noticed nothing, and adroitly kept the conversation going ; while Sibyl was luckily at that unobservant age which takes no account of faces when once they have become familiar. It was an uncomfortable meal, and they all hailed as a relief the appearance of the Captain of the *Pilgrim*, a weather-beaten Scotchman, who had driven over with a telegram which had just arrived for Mr. Britton.

Captain Britton had never felt more glad to have a guest to whom he could show hospitality.

'Come, Captain, you must breakfast with us after your long drive !' he exclaimed, in his hearty voice. 'Sibyl, run and tell Dino to lay another place.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the Captain, drawing a chair to the table; 'I breakfasted on the yacht, but I will be glad of a cup of coffee if Miss Britton has some for a late comer. I thought I'd better come over with the telegram, sir,' he continued, turning to the owner of the *Pilgrim*, 'for I had a feeling it might mean a change of plans.'

'Second-sight on your part, Captain,' said Mr. Britton, looking up; 'I am sorry to say it does mean a change of plans and an end to my holiday. I must go home at once.'

'Nothing wrong at Merlebank, I hope?' said his brother, while Francesca and Sibyl listened anxiously.

'Oh, no; it is only a business affair, but I must be home by Friday at latest. I'm afraid the *Pilgrim* would hardly manage that, Captain, eh?'

There was a general laugh.

'Well, that would be expecting a little too much of a sailing yacht,' said Captain Graham. 'I'm sorry, sir, you are called back to England. We had looked to have a pleasant cruise.'

Mr. Britton sighed.

'No peace to the wicked; eh, Francesca? In this world it is always the way that some people have more work than they wish, and others not so much. I should like a few words with you, John, in the study.'

The brothers went off together, and the old Scotch Captain turned to Sibyl.

'What would you say to a cruise, Miss Sibyl? I think that would be just the thing for you. You'd make a fine little sailor.'

'Oh, dear Captain Graham, do coax Uncle George to let me!' cried Sibyl, in an ecstasy. 'Oh, Fran, wouldn't it be lovely!'

Francesca smiled faintly, not wishing to damp the little girl's pleasure, but feeling a little more wretched than before, as she wondered whether possibly her father might think it best to send her away from home.

'Sea air would do you all the good in the world, miss,' said Captain Graham, glancing at her pale face; 'it's only a pity none of your cousins are on board, then we should have a merry party. Miss Kate, she doesn't care for the yacht, but the others, why, they are as good as sailors! Miss Lucy and Miss Molly, they kept a watch all through our last cruise; and as to little Miss Flo, why, she'd like to live on board.'

Meanwhile, in the study, the owner of the *Pilgrim* was

trying to do all in his power for his pretty niece. He had guessed, both from her face and his brother's depression, that there must have been a quarrel with young Donati on the previous night. He hoped he might be able to set things straight again before he left, but he had no idea how serious was the state of affairs,

'Look here, John,' he said, closing the door of the study, 'it has just struck me, why shouldn't you all have a trip in the yacht now she is here? There will be plenty of room for you, and the girls, and young Donati, and a couple of other friends besides, if you like. Now do think of it, for it quite vexes me that the *Pilgrim* should be down here all to no purpose.'

'You are very good,' said Captain Britton, hesitatingly; 'for myself there is nothing I should so much like; indeed, I must get away somewhere, I feel quite knocked up with this tiresome affair.'

'What affair?'

'Why, I meant to have told you all about it to-day. Poor little Francesca's engagement is broken off!'

'Dear me! how is that? You don't mean to say he is tired of her already?'

'No, that's the worst of it; the fellow is desperately in love with her still, but I have had to put a stop to it. I never was so disappointed in a man in my life.'

'It's a grave affair,' said Mr. Britton, thoughtfully, 'for I fancy little Fran's heart is quite given away.'

'That is the miserable part of it. I wish she had never seen Donati! I wish I'd never come to this place!' and the poor Captain sighed heavily.

'But have you not, perhaps, been a trifle hasty?' said his brother, remembering the promise he had made to Francesca on the previous night. 'Though starting with plenty of insular prejudice against the man I was very much struck with him yesterday. There is something noble about his face. Surely he can't be guilty of any great offence?'

'He is guilty of the greatest offence possible, he is guilty of an utter want of common-sense,' said the Captain, angrily. 'I thought we had made half an Englishman of him, but I might have known that with his Italian blood and his foolish radical ideas we should, sooner or later, fall foul of one another.'

'You are surely not going to break off the engagement because of political differences?' said Mr. Britton, getting quite on to the wrong tack.

'Mere opinions are nothing to me,' said the Captain, 'but when the fellow acts—acts upon his insane ideas—comes to me and deliberately tells me that he has taken a course which will make his marriage with Francesca out of the question for an indefinite time, what can you expect me to say?'

'I don't wonder you were very much vexed about it.'

'Vexed! I was never in such a heat in my life. Wrong as the fellow was, I am bound to apologise to him for what I said. I'll not shirk that, though I do believe the mere sight of him will put me out of temper again.'

'You think there is no hope, then, of setting matters straight? Surely you would submit to almost anything rather than put Francesca to so much pain. What if her lover is a little high-flown in his notions? Anything is better than callousness and indifference.'

'I can't explain it all to you, for did I do so I should break Donati's confidence, but soon you will see for yourself what line he has taken up, and then you will see that my anger is at least excusable. To permit the engagement to go on is out of the question while he still keeps to his resolution; Miss Claremont, I am sure, would agree with me. He is deliberately choosing a career which is bound to degrade him—he is taking the high road to hell.'

The Captain was working himself up into wrathful indignation again. Mr. Britton could only imagine that Donati had avowed his connexion with some secret political society such as he believed to exist in Italy. He saw that it was useless to attempt any further remonstrance.

'Then, if this is really quite at an end,' he said, hesitatingly, 'would it not be doubly desirable that you should all leave the neighbourhood for a time? Take a month's cruise in the *Pilgrim*. There is no chance of my using her again till August.'

'I wish you could have been with us too,' said the Captain, with a sigh. 'Must you really go off at once?'

'I must be off this evening, there's no help for it,' said Mr. Britton. 'I would give much to be with you, but this business will bear no delay—I feel like a school-boy cheated of his holiday. But look, let us decide this matter while Captain Graham is here. When would you like to start?'

'To-morrow;—no. To-morrow Count Carossa dines with us,—but on Thursday,—I really think we might start on Thursday. It's very good of you, George, to propose it. You've no idea what a relief it will be to me, for we are such near



neighbours to Donati that it would be very unpleasant to be here.'

'Well, that's settled, then,' said Mr. Britton. 'I'll go and tell Graham to make preparation for you. He will be enchanted to have you on board.'

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## CHAPTER XIII

### 'PAZIENZA'

'We may not make this world a paradise  
By walking it together, hand in hand,  
With eyes that meeting feed a double strength.  
We must be only joined by pains divine  
Of spirits blent in mutual memories.'

*Spanish Gipsy.*

CAPTAIN BRITTON had seldom felt more ill at ease than when he walked that morning up to the door of the Villa Bruno. A sallow, wrinkled old servant, with a gay scarlet neckerchief, was polishing the door-handle; she nodded to him cheerfully as he approached.

'Good-morning to you, signore; walk in. You'll find the master in the *salotto*.'

She made no sign of leaving her door-handle and duster, and indeed the Captain had long ago asked leave to walk into his neighbour's house without ceremony, and the Signora Donati and Carlo, though disliking his unheralded intrusion, had been far too courteous to return a negative to the tactless request. He crossed the vestibule and was about to enter the *salotto* when a sound of voices within made him pause, hesitate a moment, and then go instead into an adjoining room.

He had recognised the voice of Guido Donati, and guessed correctly that the uncle had driven over in hot haste from Naples on learning his nephew's startling plan. That he was exceedingly annoyed could be gathered from the tone of his voice and from the vehement and extraordinarily rapid utterance, which reminded the Captain of Carlo's tirade on the preceding night. At last the violent harangue came to an end, and Carlo's voice was heard; it was low but distinct, and the Captain could not avoid hearing the words,—

'I am sorry to vex you, uncle, but my mind is made up.'

'*Madonna Santissima!* it is made up, is it?' said the other, furiously. 'Then mine, too, is made up; and I am sorry to vex you, but not a penny of mine shall you ever inherit. Do you understand?'

There was a silence, but Captain Britton could well imagine the expressive gesture which Carlo would make.

'*Diavolo!*' cried the uncle. 'You take it calmly. You think you will live comfortably enough on that voice of yours, and laugh at the rich old uncle. You will tell a different tale a few years hence, my fine fellow, when you have a wife and children to support!'

'I shall never marry,' said Carlo, speaking more shortly than the Captain had ever before heard an Italian speak.

'What?' cried Uncle Guido. 'Then you have thrown over your betrothal for this mad scheme? An apoplexy on you! I'll have no more to do with such a fool;' and with that he strode out of the room.

The Captain only waited till he was sure the angry man had really gone, and then he knocked at the door of the *salotto*. Nothing but a conscientious sense of duty could have induced him to face at that moment his guest of the previous evening; but there was a certain rugged loyalty about Francesca's father, and he walked sturdily into the room, bracing himself up to make the necessary apology. Carlo was standing at the side window, the sunlight fell full upon him, and revealed to the Captain a very different face to the one which had haunted him through the night—a face worn with suffering, but strong and resolute, spite of its haggard look.

'I beg your pardon for intruding, but the servant told me to come in,' began the Captain, approaching him.

Carlo turned with an inarticulate exclamation, the blood rushed to his face, and a look of distress dawned in his eyes; he was tired out with all he had been through, and felt wholly unequal to another stormy discussion.

But he welcomed his visitor with native ceremoniousness, betraying only by additional courtesy any remembrance of the quarrel. The Captain remembered the letter of the morning, and all his kindly feelings returned to him, as he said heartily,—

'Carlo, I have come to apologise for the words which escaped me yesterday. I regret them more than I can tell you. You had every excuse for your anger.'

Carlo grasped his hand. 'No, no,' he said quickly, 'I was very much to blame. I am glad, sir—it is a great relief

to me—that last night was not our parting. I am grateful to you for coming here to-day.'

'I must also apologise for having inadvertently overheard some of your uncle's words,' said the Captain, who felt very uncomfortable when he remembered his involuntary eaves-dropping.

'I knew Uncle Guido would be very much against this plan,' said Carlo; and as he spoke he threw himself wearily into a chair facing Captain Britton's.

The Captain was struck by the look of extreme physical exhaustion both in the face and in the attitude; he began to realise the difference between his own physique and that of the Italian, and faintly to understand that Carlo had a greater capacity for feeling pain than he had himself.

'Did you realise that this scheme of yours—this scheme which I still most strongly disapprove—would cost you so dear?' he asked abruptly. 'Did you think your uncle would have disinherited you?'

'I didn't think about the money at all,' said Carlo; 'but I knew he would be annoyed.'

'But does this make no change in your feeling? Are you willing to lose every single thing you possess, and even to forfeit the respect of your friends for the sake of this plan?'

'Yes,' he said simply; 'I am willing, sir.'

When he had spoken he let his head drop wearily on to his hand; he was calm with the calm of blank bereavement, for like the Princess in the poem, he had found that

'Not to fear because all is taken  
Is the loneliest depth of human pain.'

The Captain sighed. He was not angry now, only very much annoyed at the impossibility of inducing one bereft of common-sense to see reason.

'You make light of the loss of income,' he said at length; 'but how will you fare supposing you fall ill?'

Carlo looked up with an odd sort of smile.

'Well, you will think me unpractical,' he said; 'but I have never been ill in my life, and I had not considered that possibility. However, my salary is a tolerably fair one for a novice, and if the worst comes to the worst there are always the hospitals.'

'Carlo,' broke in the Captain, 'I can't bear to think of one who has led the life you have led going out into such a world! What would your poor mother have said to it?'

Carlo's face lighted up as if the suggestion had given him some unexpected comfort.

'At least our dead understand us,' he said, fervently; 'they know that I am trying to keep my promise.'

The Captain felt that his small stock of patience would not last much longer, and Carlo, glancing at him, saw that their parting, though peaceable, would be final; he knew intuitively that although the Captain had taken back some of his harsh words, he still regarded him as at any rate a self-deceived deceiver, a man who under the cloak of duty veiled his craving for change and excitement, or, at best, as an enthusiast who could be but despised for giving up solid realities for foolish dreams. Their friendship was at an end; for, though love is undying, friendship is quite a different thing, and there are shocks which it will not survive.

'There is one other thing I wished to say,' said Captain Britton, rising, 'and that is, that if you wish you may have one more interview with Francesca.'

Carlo caught eagerly at this boon, and the Captain suggested that he should return with him to Casa Bella.

'Does she know of——' he hesitated how to put it, 'of your decision?'

'I have not spoken to her about it, but I know she infers it,' said the Captain, rather coldly.

Carlo paced the room for a minute, struggling with his emotion; he was not sure whether he had strength to meet Francesca and tell her with his own lips that all was over between them.

'If you wish to see her we had better come at once,' said the Captain. 'My brother is unexpectedly called back to England, and we have much to see to to-day.'

He was vexed that Donati did not show more gratitude for the concession he had made, for he was a man who liked to be thanked, and it had not been easy for him to retract what he had first said. Something in his tone stung Carlo; he drew himself together. '*Ebbene, signore,*' he said gravely, forgetting his English, as he often did when much moved, and recovering it with an effort. 'If you will permit it I will accompany you.'

They walked away from the Villa Bruno in silence, Carlo thinking of the Captain's words, 'We have much to see to to-day.' How calmly he classed the supreme struggle of his life, the parting that was as death to him, with the trivial household commotion caused by Mr. Britton's journey.

But once back in his own house the Captain's kinder feelings

returned ; he took Carlo to the Rose-room, then held out his hand cordially.

'This had better be our final parting,' he said, 'I leave home on Thursday. Good-bye, Carlo. Should you even now see fit to give up this foolish scheme I should be quite willing to reconsider matters.'

'My mind is made up, sir,' said Carlo, turning sadly away.

'So it appears. Well, I will send Francesca to you.'

He closed the door ; and Carlo, with a choking feeling in his throat, looked round the dear, familiar room, the very untidiness of which breathed of Francesca. The 'Dying Gladiator' for Clare reposed perilously on a shaky pile of books ; a kitten was worrying a ball of red wool on the sofa ; and the sock in process of knitting, and which he knew had been intended for him, lay at a little distance on the floor. He turned to the window, and looked out at his old friend Vesuvius with its cloud of smoke, and at the glimpses of blue sea visible here and there between the trees. Then, with an aching consciousness that these were left to him, but that he should never more stand in that little room, he turned and looked round it, as though he wished to stamp for ever on his mind all its girlish decorations, all its familiar details. But the sound of footsteps without roused him and dispelled his calm ; the door opened, and Francesca came quickly forward to greet him ; she always entered a room more quickly, yet more gracefully than other people, but now she almost ran towards him, she wanted him not to notice her wan, tear-stained face.

If, however, in one sense love is blind, in another it is all-observant ; in one glance he had read all, and in that glance there came to him the sharpest of his suffering.

Stifling the sobs that rose in his throat he held her in a long, close embrace, but to speak was impossible ; and though there was comfort and rapture in her presence, yet there was also anguish which threatened to unman him. At length he put her gently from him, and turned away that he might fight down his emotion. For a few minutes there was silence, then he came and sat beside her on the sofa, and, putting his arm round her, drew her head down on to his shoulder.

'*Carina,*' he said, and the mellow baritone voice was firm, yet terribly sad, 'your father would not let me see you last night, but to-day he allows me this one more meeting with you. He said he had not spoken to you, but that you knew what had passed between us.'

'Yes," she said, her tears raining down quietly; 'I knew it must be so when I heard you go.'

They talked sometimes in English, sometimes in Italian, as had been their custom ever since childhood.

'Darling,' he said, tenderly, 'I am bound to obey your father's decree; there could be no right betrothal for us without his consent, and so you stand free once more. You must try, *carina*, not to let these three short weeks spoil your life; you will try, my own, my darling, for it would break my heart if I thought I had ruined your happiness.'

'Love ought not to weaken us,' she said tremulously, for in her heart she felt that apart from Carlo she should be like a rudderless boat. 'These three weeks ought to give me courage for the rest.'

There was indescribable sadness in the last two words.

'Ah, darling!' cried Carlo, passionately, 'don't speak of your beautiful young life like that!'

And then he was silent again. All the strength and ardour of their mutual love seemed to rise up against the Captain's decree; if for the present they were fain to obey it and to part, yet hopes for the future would rise; perhaps each intuitively knew what was in the other's heart, but no words passed between them; indeed when Carlo did speak it was almost as if he wished to reason away any brightness which might hover over their future.

'You see, my darling,' he said, 'even should this immediate danger no longer keep me from you, even if Nita no longer needed me, I shall have cut myself off from you hopelessly,—we must face that. I shall by that time, if I succeed at all, be to the world Donati the singer, and your father would certainly not choose me for his son-in-law. Then, again, Uncle Guido has disinherited me, so that if I gave up the stage I should be penniless and more or less unfitted for work as an advocate.'

'Has he indeed disinherited you? Oh, Carlino, what troubles you have had! Don't let me be another, darling. See, I'll not cry any more; we must think of what is still left us. The worst they can do to us is to keep us apart; they can't kill our love, they can't check our prayers for each other—the best part, the highest part no one can meddle with.'

He held her closely, murmuring tender Italian words of endearment; and the clock on the mantelpiece ticked on inexorably, measuring all too quickly the time which, when they were parted, would move with leaden feet. Rosalind should surely have said 'parting lovers' rather than a 'thief going to

the gallows' when asked, 'Who gallops Time withal?' And still they lingered over the sweet, unwritable talk till the clock relentlessly struck twelve, and roused them to the recollection of the outer world.

Then Francesca drew off her engagement ring, and placed it in his hand.

'There, Carlo,' she said, steadily, 'I give you back the ring and your troth, and I will obey my father, and will neither hear from you nor write to you; but more than that no woman can promise, for love is not made and unmade to order.'

Carlo put on the ring, which from a token of union had now become changed to a token of separation. He was too heart-broken to speak, and after a long pause it was Francesca who at length broke the silence.

'Tell me a little more of the sort of life you shall live,' she said, gently.

So he told her all that he knew, which was little enough; how he should live with the Merlinos, try to win his sister's love, study hard for his profession, do his best to be a credit to Piale.

'And you?' he asked. 'There will be new neighbours for you at Villa Bruno, but it is hardly likely that it will be used by another occupant except during the summer months.'

'Ah! will it be let?' asked Francesca, her eyes filling. 'Well, I hope we shall not know the people who take it. For the rest, darling, you can picture me as living the old life, going into Naples on Sunday, teaching Sibyl, rowing with Florestano. But for this next month we are to go for a cruise in the *Pilgrim*, and perhaps next year I may go to England.'

'You would like to be with Clare?'

'Yes; though I suppose father will not like me to tell her now of these three weeks, and it will be hard that she should never know. Carlo, why should not you go to see Clare when you are in England?'

He shook his head.

'She would disapprove too strongly of my change of professions,' he said; 'and it is not a change that I can explain to all the world. Then, too, she lives in your uncle's house, and, after what has happened, he would hardly care to have me there.'

'Uncle George likes you very much,' said Francesca, quickly.

Carlo did not reply, but he thought differently. It was not then, however, that he could care to discuss so trifling a matter;

time was passing, and he knew that Captain Britton must already be expecting him to go. The thought broke down all his self-control: his calmness gave place to a passionate outburst of love and grief, which recalled to Francesca his sudden change in the belvedere when he had first asked for her love.

She clung to him now as she had done then, but it was not of love and present bliss which she spoke.

'Patience, Carlo *mio*; patience,' she whispered. 'It is, after all, that which we need.'

The word brought back to him the recollection of his dying father, and calmed the tumult of feeling. He held her sweet face between his hands, looked long into those pure eyes, and grew strong once more.

'*Pazienza!*' he murmured, clasping her again in his arms. 'God have you in His keeping.'

\* \* \* \* \*

At the gate of Casa Bella Mr. George Britton, much to his dismay, chanced to encounter the owner of Villa Bruno, quite the last man he would have chosen to meet. All that he could do was to assume that nothing had happened, and to bid him a courteous farewell. He held out his hand.

Carlo turned upon him a face which haunted the kindly Englishman for many months to come. But, even in his anguish, he could not be otherwise than courteous; a look of effort passed over his deathly features, and

'With pale lips  
That seemed to motion for a smile in vain,'

he said, as he bowed over the Englishman's hand, '*Buon viaggio, signore! A rivederci!*'

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE NEW BARITONE

'Small spheres hold small fires.  
But he loved largely, as a man can love  
Who, baffled in his love, dares live his life,  
Accept the ends which God loves for his own,  
And lift a constant aspect.'—E. B. BROWNING.

It was a hot summer morning, and two ragged little Neapolitans were sauntering along the Chiaja; the elder had flung



his arm caressingly round the other's neck, the younger held in his hand a ragged cap full of cherries, from which they were eating contentedly as they walked. A carriage rolled past them, and both boys looked up with sharp, eager eyes.

'*Gran Dio!*' cried one. 'Look! yonder goes Comerio the singer.'

'Tis he himself,' said the other, with a look of interest; 'and in a vile temper, too; his brow is black as a starless night!'

'They say he beats his wife,' said the elder boy, with a laugh, which was only checked by the offer of a ripe red cherry which his brother held up to his mouth.

Meanwhile the carriage had gone by, and Comerio was, before long, set down at the entrance to Palazzo Forti. He paid the driver, and then, with no very amiable expression, made his way up the long stone staircase and rang the bell.

A maid-servant, whom he had tried unsuccessfully to bribe on former occasions, opened the door to him.

'Is Signor Merlino at the theatre?' he asked, anxious to know whether the coast was clear.

'Yes, signore,' replied the girl. 'What message can I give him?'

'I will give it to Signora Merlino,' said the visitor, preparing to enter.

The maid showed all her teeth in a merry smile.

'But the Signora is still at rehearsal.'

'*Orsù!*' exclaimed Comerio, impatiently, 'I might have known. Well, I will come in then, and wait till they return.'

He was shown into a little ante-room, where for a few minutes he paced to and fro, but suddenly becoming conscious that in the next room someone was monotonously humming *La donna è mobile*, he hastily entered and glanced round. At first nothing was visible, but after a moment or two he discovered the singer, a little brown-eyed boy of four years old, who was perched on the window-sill, and half hidden by the curtain.

'Good-morning, Gigi,' he said pleasantly.

The little fellow flung aside the curtain; he seemed very glad to see the visitor.

'Good-morning, signore,' he said, smiling till his sallow little face looked almost pretty. 'Are there——' he looked longingly, yet hesitatingly, in the direction of Comerio's pocket,—'are there any bonbons?'

Comerio made a gesture of mock despair.

'Why, Gigi, how can I have forgotten? I promised you some *marrons glacés*, did I not? but, indeed, the bad news of this morning drove everything out of my head.'

'What bad news?' said the little boy, with an anxious look that seemed to be beyond his years.

'I am going away, Gigi; I shall never travel about with you any more. There will be a new baritone,—one who is not likely to carry *marrons glacés* in his pocket, or to play games with you, for he sets up for being a saint.'

'A saint?' said the child. 'What is that? I thought they were things in the sky.'

'A saint is one who is fond of keeping other people in order. San Carlo will spy out in no time what a naughty little monkey you are.'

'I wish he wasn't coming,' said the child, looking ready to cry. 'I don't see why saints want to sing in operas; they should stop in heaven.'

Comerio laughed.

'Quite right, little one, so they should,' he said, patting Gigi's head. 'But look, my Gigi, will you do one little thing for your old friend, to please him for the last time?'

The boy nodded and looked up with bright, intelligent eyes into the wily face of the baritone.

Comerio drew out a letter and placed it in his hands.

'When your mother comes home, run after her into her room, and when you find her alone—quite alone—give this note to her. Do you understand? It is a secret; no one else must know—no one at all.'

'I know, I know; I can keep a secret!' cried Gigi, gleefully. 'Mamma and I often keep secrets from papa, she taught me how, soon as ever I left Salem.'

Comerio gave a cynical smile.

'Mind you do,' he said, commandingly. 'I shall find out if you play me false. And look here, little one, here are two *lire* for you, and you can tell anyone you like that Comerio came to say good-bye to you, and told you to spend that at Caffisch's. There, I must go now. Don't forget me.'

He stooped and kissed the little fallow face, then hastily took his departure, having seen that the letter was securely stowed away in the child's pocket.

Gigi, with a thoughtful look, poked his closely-cropped head out of the window and watched Comerio as he walked down the street. He was hardly out of sight when a carriage drew up

at the door,—a carriage with one gentleman seated in it, and with luggage on the box. Gigi's head was promptly withdrawn, and, in a sudden access of terror, he wrapped himself round in the curtain.

'I do b'lieve,' he said to himself in English, 'I do b'lieve it is San Carlo.'

After a time he heard the door of the ante-room opened and the servant's voice saying that the Signora would soon be back from rehearsal; then another voice, so clear and sweet that the child almost forgot to be afraid, said in reply, 'Very well, I will come in here, then, and wait.'

The footsteps drew nearer. Gigi shook in his shoes, yet felt a burning curiosity to see the new comer—this dread being who was to be ever on the watch to spy out his faults.

The stranger seemed to walk up to the piano and to turn over the books lying upon it; then there was such complete silence that Gigi felt sure he must be reading, and ventured to peer out from his hiding-place.

He saw that the visitor was leaning in an easy attitude over the piano, his head propped up by his hand, and his eyes bent upon the score of some opera. Gigi could only see his side face, but that fascinated him, and somehow he did not feel any longer afraid. He was impatient to attract the stranger's notice, but, though he moved the curtain, it was of no use, the new comer seemed quite absorbed in the music he was reading. At last, in despair, Gigi resolved to speak.

'San Carlo!' he said, timidly, thrusting his head a little further forward.

The stranger looked up in surprise, and when he saw the quaint little face peeping out from the curtain, he came forward a few steps, looking very much puzzled.

'I don't know,' said Gigi, politely, 'but I think you are the new baritone.'

Something in this address so tickled the stranger that he began to laugh. His laugh was a very pleasant one.

'You have guessed rightly,' he said, 'but I am not so clever, and cannot guess your name at all.'

'I am Gigi,' said the child, gravely. 'Signor Sardoni laughs at my name and says it is only fit for a pony, but then he is only an Englishman and knows no better; though, after all, I like him, and I like to talk in English, as we did at Salem.'

As he spoke, the little fellow lifted a pair of beautiful dark eyes to the stranger's face; his eyes were his only beauty, they were wonderfully expressive, and something in their depths was familiar to the new comer. He came closer and studied the child's face more attentively.

'Gigi,' he said, 'I think you must be my little nephew, though no one has taken the trouble to tell me of your existence.'

'Oh, no,' said the child—they were talking now in English—'I have an uncle, but he is not like you; he is not the new baritone; he is rich, and lives in a beautiful villa in the country.'

'He lives there no longer; the villa is to be let, and he is coming to live with you,' said the stranger, taking the child on his knee. 'Come, tell me the rest of your name, Gigi.'

'I have three,' said Gigi, with dignity, 'though they all use call me Gigi for short. My whole name is Luigi Bruno Merlino, and I shall be four next month.'

'Then there is no doubt that I am your uncle,' said Carlo, kissing the child on both cheeks.

But Gigi, with a shrewd look much beyond his years, shook his head emphatically.

'If you are the new baritone, then you are San Carlo, and San Carlo could hardly be my uncle. You set up for being a saint, you know, and are fond of keeping other people in order; and you will never play games, but will all use know when I do what is wrong. I badly wished you weren't coming, but somehow you are not quite what I thought.'

The child's words were so comical that they carried no sting; Carlo could only smile at them.

'I am glad of that,' he said, patting the closely-cropped head. 'You must have been expecting a regular ogre.'

'No, not an ogre, but a saint. It was Signor Comerio that told me about you.'

'Ah,' said Carlo, unpleasantly enlightened; 'you see, as Signor Comerio and I have never met, he can only have drawn a fancy picture of me.'

'I am sorry Signor Comerio is going, he was to have given me some *marrons glacés*, but he gave me two *lire* instead just now—at least, he said so. It was a bit of paper, but he said I was to spend it. In America we all use have proper money. Do you think this paper will really buy me *marrons glacés* at Caffisch's?'

He began to grope in his pocket, and drew forth an

envelope. Carlo could not help seeing that it was addressed to Signora Merlino. A sudden recollection flashed across him of his interview in that very room with Sardoni, and of the Englishman's assurance that Merlino watched his wife's correspondence with lynx eyes, and did not scruple to open all her letters. And Comerio had apparently just been to Palazzo Forti.

'How stupid I are!' said Gigi, thrusting the envelope back again. 'Did you see, San Carlo?'

'Yes, I did,' said Carlo, without any comment.

'Signor Comerio said you would always spy out everything,' said the child, pouting. 'It was a secret, and I promised to keep it; and he will be so angry when he finds out.'

'If you promised to give the letter, you must do so,' said Carlo, gravely.

'Yes, but no one else was to see it,' said Gigi, beginning to cry. 'Oh, dear San Carlo, do promise not to tell, for when Signor Comerio is angry he looks so fierce, and it does frighten me.'

'No one shall hurt you,' said Carlo, putting his arm round the child. 'Don't cry, Gigi; I am very fond of you. No one shall hurt you at all.'

'And you won't tell papa?' said Gigi, still sobbing. 'You see there are things that must be kept from papa, and mamma taught me how when I came away from Salem.'

Carlo felt sick at heart; he remembered how on that Sunday a fortnight ago he had first felt the sensation of coming unexpectedly into a network of evil; now he realised that it was in the very midst of this that he had ordained to live, and he shuddered as the little child composedly described his training in deceit.

'Why do you sit looking so silent, San Carlo?—I mean, looking so grave?' said Gigi, drying his eyes. 'Are you angry with me?'

'No, I am not at all angry; but I am very sorry you promised to give that letter and to keep that secret.'

'Are all secrets wrong?'

'No, there are some things we cannot tell to everyone, but they must never be things of which we are ashamed. Suppose you had a beautiful diamond, and were travelling along a road where you feared brigands, you would hide your treasure quite away, and that would be right and wise; but, if you had stolen a diamond from a shop in the Toledo, and

hid it for fear of having it taken from you, that would be wrong; do you see?’

‘And was Signor Comerio ashamed of his secret, and afraid that it would be found out and taken away from him?’

‘Yes, he was,’ said Carlo; ‘and that is why I was sorry you had not said “no” when he asked you to help him.’

‘I will say “no” another time,’ said Gigi.

‘That’s right,’ said Carlo, kissing him, and then he quickly turned the conversation, afraid that the child might question him further, and lose faith in his mother.

They were still sitting in the window when Anita returned from rehearsal. She gave a little cry of astonishment when she saw her brother, and came forward quickly to greet him.

‘Carlino!’ she exclaimed, in her excitement returning to his old childish name. ‘Are you come already? My husband has only to-day told me of your decision.’ She drew him a little away from the child, and the tears rose to her eyes as she said, with more solicitude than she had ever shown for him, ‘Dear Carlo, do you realise what you undertake? I know you want to help me—I understood it in a moment—but do you know what this life is? It is no play-work, as some people think; a public singer leads the life of a cart-horse.’

‘Plenty of work is what I shall like best,’ said Carlo, kissing her. ‘If only I can shield you, Nita, I shall be well content.’

She shivered a little, and went on in an undertone,—

‘I saw him for a moment at the theatre, after he knew he was to leave the company; his face terrifies me to remember, for I know he understands why it is you have taken his place. But Merlino suspects nothing—that is the one great comfort.’

At this moment Gigi trotted up rather shyly.

‘Mamma,’ he said, pulling at her dress, ‘I promised Signor Comerio I would give you this when you were alone, but I forgot, and pulled it out of my pocket just now, and San Carlo saw it; so I may as well give it you now, directly.’

The colour rushed into Nita’s face; she made as though she would tear the letter in pieces without opening it, but Carlo checked her.

‘Return it just as it is,’ he suggested. ‘Direct it to him yourself, and I will see that it reaches him safely.’

Nita hastily crossed the room, and enclosed the letter in an envelope; she knew that Comerio would recognise her writing in a moment, and directed it hastily, perhaps hardly considering that by doing so she had crossed the Rubicon.

But Carlo understood, and knew well that only by showing her all possible love and tenderness could he hope to fill this blank in her life.

'You never told me of this little man's existence,' he said, glancing at Gigi, when she had handed him the letter and he had put it away in his pocket. 'You should have brought him with you to Villa Bruno.'

'He had the chicken-pox,' said Nita, indifferently. 'I suppose he took it on board the steamer—indeed, I always thought it a great mistake to bring him away from America, but Merlino was set upon having him; he is very fond of the child.'

Carlo felt discouraged; it was quite clear that Nita did not even pretend to care much for her little son. She went on in a complaining voice,—

'He was happy enough at Salem, and, indeed, is always begging to go back again. The people there had brought him up, for, of course, I couldn't drag a baby all over the States with me.'

'It was a farmhouse,' put in Gigi, 'and I allude went out with the pigs every day. I wish there was pigs here.'

Carlo smiled, but thought Gigi deserved better companionship.

'Merlino knew that we should be in America again in another year,' continued Anita, 'but he had some foolish feeling against leaving the child so far off, and so I suppose we shall have to take him about with us for the present. Men don't realise what trouble a child gives. Merlino likes to play with him now and then for ten minutes, but he would never be bothered with him, and he won't let me have a nurse even. It is absurd to expect me to see to him when already I am almost worked to death.'

Carlo thought there was some truth in this, though he was sorry she seemed to have so little motherly feeling; but that her life was very hard he could well believe, and she looked delicate and overwrought.

'How do you manage?' he said. 'Is there no one to help you with him?'

'The stewardess was kind to him when we crossed, and then, when he was ill, the servant saw to him; but really, poor girl, the landlady leads her such a life that she can't spare time to make him look respectable. He hasn't been out since we came to Naples; I couldn't take such a little scarecrow with me.'

'Maria doesn't do anything for me now,' put in Gigi. 'I can dress myself, mamma, quite well, and I haven't been washed at all just lately.'

'You would have been far better with your pigs at Salem,' said Nita, laughing a little, while Carlo, though perhaps not quite so much disgusted as an Englishman would have been, began to revolve schemes for tubbing his small nephew.

'Then you have really made up your mind to stop here as long as we are at Naples?' asked Nita. 'You will find it a contrast to Villa Bruno.'

'Piale will prefer to have me close at hand,' said Carlo. 'And, indeed, I think it will be better every way. Is there a room for me here?'

'Yes, you can have the room where Gigi was ill; there is no need for him to have a room all to himself now that he is well again; he can sleep on the sofa in the ante-room.'

'Oh, don't turn him out,' said Carlo, and the matter ended in a small bed being extemporised for Gigi in a corner, much to his contentment.

'For you know,' he said, trotting after his uncle, 'when it is all dark, I feel so alone; and last night I *really* think there was a cow under my bed.'

Nita retired before long for her siesta, and Carlo, with the assistance of Gigi, took possession of his new quarters, and unpacked his worldly goods. When all was done, he flung himself back in an arm-chair to rest, and Gigi curled himself up like a little dog at his feet. For a time there was silence, then Carlo was struck by a happy idea.

'Gigi,' he said, 'would you like to come and walk with me in the Villa?'

'What's the Villa?' asked the child. 'Do you mean Villa Bruno?'

'No, I meant the Villa Nazionale,—a garden, you know, with beautiful trees. Would you like to come with me?'

'Oh, yes!' cried Gigi, with a beaming face; 'it will be almost like being at Salem again.'

'With the pigs,' put in Carlo, laughingly. 'But look, before I take you we must make you tidy and clean, don't you think?'

'Perhaps,' said Gigi, with a sigh.

'Are there any baths here?'

'Signor Sardoni has one; he is English, you know, and takes it cold every morning,—quite cold; he asked yesterday whether he should lend it to me, but I guess he was only in fun.'



'Run and ask him, with my compliments, if he will really do so,' said Carlo, much amused.

There was an interval in which he dozed a little; presently back came the child, dragging after him an indiarubber travelling-bath, and followed by Maria, whom he had induced to bring a can of hot water, fearful lest San Carlo should expect him to plunge into cold like the English.

Maria, with a broad smile, suggested that he had better have clean clothes as well, and managed to find some for him; she might even have offered to tub him had not the padrona's voice been heard calling her impatiently, and, with a saucy retort to her mistress, she ran off, leaving Carlo and his victim to manage as they could.

Very slowly and reluctantly the tiny fellow divested himself of his clothes, and stood shivering on the brink; Carlo, had he been of an introspective nature, would have been amused at the thought that his first piece of work in his new career was to scrub a grubby little child; being not at all introspective, but extremely practical, he only wondered how in the world he was to do it, and where he was to begin.

'Come, Gigi,' he said, encouragingly, 'I shall pretend you are a pony, as Signor Sardoni says you ought to be; get in quickly and I will groom you.'

Gigi was imaginative, and this notion suited him very well; he began to kick and prance, but no longer objected to the soap and water, indeed, after the first shock he rather liked them; and the scrubbing was at any rate satisfactory work—more promptly visible in its effects than any of Carlo's other work was likely to be. Gigi, who had gone in grimy and shivering, came out a beautiful white, wet, little mortal, with sleek, shining skin, and cheeks glowing like ruddy apples.

'I like it,' he said proudly, 'I like it very much. If I'm good, San Carlo, will you groom me again some day?'

'Every day, till you can do it yourself,' said Carlo promptly, at which Gigi clapped his hands.

'At Salem,' he said, 'we only had Saturday for tub night, and it was so cold in the back-kitchen.'

Carlo, after this remark, thought that whatever the drawbacks of travelling in Merlino's company, the child was better off than in the primitive farmhouse with his four-footed friends.

## CHAPTER XV

## A DEAR ADVENTURE

'Next . . . I betook me among those lofty fables and romances which recount in solemn cantos the deeds of knighthood. . . . There I read it in the oath of every knight that he should defend to the expense of his best blood, or of his life, if it so befel him, the honour and chastity of virgin or matron. From whence even then I learnt what a noble virtue chastity ever must be, to the defence of which so many worthies by such a dear adventure of themselves had sworn. . . . Only this my mind gave me, that every free and gentle spirit without that oath ought to be born a knight, nor needed to expect the gilt spur, or the laying of a sword upon his shoulder, to stir him up, both by his counsel and his arm to serve and protect the weakness of any attempted chastity.'

MILTON.

GIGI, much pleased with his appearance, and with the novel feeling of cleanliness, capered away to the *sala* to relate his experiences to Sardoni. Carlo followed him, and found Merlino just awake after his siesta, and looking rather more like a surly bear than usual as he yawned and stretched himself. He roused himself, however, to introduce his brother-in-law to the tenor, not knowing that the two had met before; and they thought it best not to explain, but bowed ceremoniously to each other.

'Papa,' said Gigi, gleefully; 'San Carlo is going to take me to walk in the Villa!'

'San Carlo! what do you mean, child?' said Merlino, his voice softening as he patted his son's head.

'Why *him*,' said Gigi, with an expressive gesture; 'Signor Comerio told me he was San Carlo, and I wondered what saints wanted with operas; but he is oh! ever so much nicer than Comerio said.'

The three men laughed involuntarily.

'Comerio did not at all like getting his *cong  *,' said Merlino. 'This is just a little display of spite on his part. When did you see him, child?'

'He came in to say good-bye to me this morning while you were at rehearsal, and he gave me this to spend. Oh, dear, San Carlo, might we go to Caflisch's now?'

'You must not call your uncle by that name,' said Merlino; 'it is rude.'

'Why, I thought it was a kind of politeness,' said Gigi, with a puzzled face; 'and that it was only for the very best things.'

'In that case you had better not uncanonise Signor Donati,' said Sardoni, who had watched the scene with a sort of careless amusement. 'If you'll allow me, Gigi, I will also come with you.'

Carlo looked pleased; he could not have explained why Sardoni attracted him, but already he felt that the Englishman would be his friend. His discovery of Gigi that morning had broken the blank desolateness which for the last four-and-twenty hours had overwhelmed him, and the sight of Sardoni somehow cheered him yet more. Possibly the mere fact that the tenor was Francesca's fellow-countryman prejudiced him in his favour; and then, although the Englishman's careless, witty-looking face was perhaps not of the very highest type, yet there was something winning about it,—something which interested Carlo and took him out of himself and his own cares.

'So you have changed your mind since I saw you the other day,' said Sardoni, as they walked down the Toledo. 'You think stage life may, after all, bear comparison with private life?'

'I am going to try my fortune as a singer,' said Carlo lightly, but revealing in his face all that he strove to banish from his tone. Sardoni drew his own conclusions, but had too much tact to ask any questions.

'I was never more astounded than when Merlino told me the news,' he remarked; 'and I think seldom more pleased; the Company will be well rid of Comerio, who is a double-dyed villain such as one seldom meets.'

'I must own that in looks he gives one the impression of being less of a brute than Merlino himself,' said Carlo, lowering his voice cautiously.

'Looks are not everything,' said Sardoni; 'there are some faces—yours for instance—which can be read in an instant; but there are others which baffle one altogether. Merlino is not so bad as he seems; at any rate while he is a brute the other is a fiend.'

'How did he take his dismissal?' asked Carlo.

'I heard very little about it, but apparently he has taken good care not to quarrel with Merlino. No doubt he'll move heaven and earth to get into the troupe again, he is not a man who will stand being beaten.'

'Yet Merlino would never have us both, I suppose?'

'No; so it will now be to Comerio's interest to oust you. Don't think me a brute to speak out plainly, but when I caught sight of Comerio's face as he left the theatre I thought I wouldn't be in your shoes for a million of money. That fellow

is your enemy, and he may nurse his revenge for years, but, sooner or later, he'll have it.'

A feeling of vague discomfort crept over Carlo; for a minute he was silent, then, with a look in his face which startled Sardoni, he said cheerfully,—

'I owe you a great deal; it was through you that I first knew there was a chance of helping my sister in this way, and now you have taken the trouble to warn me of a danger. One must not dwell on such things, though perhaps it is well to know of them.'

'I should have thought,' said Sardoni, smiling, 'that you would be more likely to curse me than to bless me for having first put into your head a notion that must have cost you dear.'

Carlo gave a quick glance at his companion, wondering whether he had the least conception how great the cost had been. Perhaps he was glad to be spared any direct answer to the remark by their arrival at Caffisch's, and the necessity of helping Gigi to lay out his two *lire* to the best advantage.

Afterwards they strolled on to the Villa, and, while Gigi played about happily, the two men sat under the trees, Sardoni finding a sort of idle pleasure in studying his new companion.

'Do you mean to sing under your own name?' he asked, after a time.

'Yes,' replied Carlo; 'I have no object in taking a *nom de guerre*; with an English name, of course, it is different—you were almost bound to do so.'

Sardoni gave a sarcastic smile.

'It was most necessary,' he remarked, drily. 'Did my own people know how I gained my livelihood they would be even more ashamed of me than they are already.'

Carlo looked surprised, even a little anxious. His interest in Sardoni grew deeper.

'They do not then know where you are?' he asked. 'That is surely very hard on them.'

The tenor gave a short laugh.

'Not at all; I am silent purely out of regard for their feelings. Do you know what the old Puritans used to call actors? They called them "caterpillars of the Commonwealth" and "vagabonds."'

'That may be, but family feeling must in the end be stronger than such prejudice.'

'You judge others by yourself,' said Sardoni. 'All families are not so devoted as yours seems to be.' Then, his brow contracting sharply, 'Besides, did I not tell you when we first

met that, in my own country, men would no longer trust my word as blindly as you seem inclined to do ?'

'Why will you always force that upon me ?' said Carlo, looking full into his companion's eyes. 'Do you wish to make me doubt you ? That is hardly a friendly act, since you are the one light just now in my dark sky.'

The words sounded strangely in Sardoni's ear, the simile was so un-English, but the tone touched him more than he would have cared to own.

'I force this upon you because I like you,' he said, with some effort. 'You are the first man I have seen whose friendship I could have wished. But I will be friends with no man who does not know the truth about me ; and whoever knew the truth would not care to be my friend.'

'I should care,' said Carlo, quickly.

The Englishman shook his head. Then, suddenly resuming his usual reckless, nonchalant manner, he said with a laugh, 'Few men, I fancy, have managed to sustain their *nom de guerre* so completely ; Merlino himself has not even a notion of my true surname.'

'What induced you to take the name of Sardoni ?' asked Carlo.

'Well, according to the character of my questioner I have two replies,' said Sardoni. 'Matter of fact : It occurred to me one morning when I was breakfasting off sardines. Poetic : I assumed it in a sardonic mood, while contemplating a journey to Sardinia. We have some funny improvements on names among us.'

'Are they chiefly Italians in the company ?'

'Oh ! we are a very mixed multitude,' said Sardoni. 'I'll prepare you for your future lot and give you a faithful description of the "happy band of pilgrims." Let us be more courteous than the playhills, and take the ladies first. Top of the list stands Madame Merlino, who needs no description. Next comes Mlle. Elise de Caisne, a little French flirt. Then the two mezzos, Mlle. Lauriston, ditto, ditto, and Miss Robinson, who hails from New York, but sings under the name of Duroc ; she is an average American girl, and can be pleasant enough, also, which speaks well for her—she is hand in glove with Domenica Borelli. The Borelli is a Maltese lady, in reality Borg—everyone is a Borg in Malta. She is a contralto with a wonderful compass, a real good painstaking artist, the joy of Marioni's heart ; there exists between them a platonic friendship. Next we come to the tenors.'

'Headed by Signor Sardonì,' put in Carlo, with a smile.

'And close on my heels,' continued the Englishman, 'follow my two rivals, Crevelli and Caffieri—awfully jealous of me—awfully; not of each other, that's the odd part; but then they are so much alike that it's always a case of "Which is which?" and when one is praised the other thinks it was a mistake and really meant for him; those two are *bona fide* Italians, and as like as two peas,—broad forehead, straight, black hair, correct profile, big moustache, great expanse of cheek. You'll find some trouble in knowing them apart, but at last I've induced Crevelli to keep his hair an inch longer than the other's, just for convenience' sake.

'That brings us to the basses, and to your brother-in-law; we won't discuss him: you'll find that he gets well treated because they all live in mortal terror of him. Then, Gomez. Gomez has raven hair and a sad cast of countenance, he hails from Seville and stands much on his dignity. Tannini, alias Joshua C. Tanner, is a jolly Yankee, and has a keen eye to the main chance. A very practical man is Tanner; he'll soon be "calc'ulating that he can't understand such a knight-errant" as you. Next comes Bauer—a good solid lump of humanity, always in at dinner-time and to be found at odd hours tucking in, regardless of the coming opera. He reminds me of an old nursery song of ours, about—

"A duck, who had got such a habit of stuffing,  
That all the day long it was panting and puffing."

Bauer's often out of breath on the stage, you'll find. Then there is Donati, the baritone, whose character I have not yet fathomed; and Fasola, a miserable stick, capable only of third-rate parts, but supposed to be your under-study; and, finally, our little conductor, Marioni, who wears himself to fiddlestrings, all out of devotion to the muse, and tears his hair—you'll see presently how ragged it is—because he can't get things done as he would wish.'

'I have heard Piale speak very highly of him,' said Carlo, and then he sat silent for a minute or two, musing over Sardonì's odd description of his future companions, and wondering what this strange new life would be like.

'Was Comerio a favourite?' he asked at length.

'He was hated by some and liked by others; Domenica Borelli, for instance, was not on speaking terms with him.'

'And yet travelled in the same company?'

'Oh, that is perfectly possible! I don't think she has spoken to him since we were at San Francisco, a year ago, yet of course they had to act together. The Borelli is extremely fastidious, she will highly approve of the change of baritones. But Gomez will hate you, for he is Comerio's friend; I shouldn't be surprised if he got up a cabal against you.'

Again Carlo was silent, he looked down the long, shady walk with its sombre ilex-trees; the prospect of his new life had never before seemed so distasteful to him, and it was with a sense of relief that he caught sight of Enrico Ritter coming towards them with his usual long, imperturbable stride. Enrico seemed his last link with the past, and he was glad to be able to introduce him to Sardoni.

'I have just met your uncle,' said Enrico, abruptly, as he took the vacant place beside Carlo.

'Then, of course, you know all?'

'Yes, and I find it hard to forgive you,' said Enrico.

'To forgive?' echoed Carlo, questioningly.

'Yes, to forgive. You have falsified my pet theory,' said the egoist. 'Here, give me one of your cards and I'll tell you in two words what I think of you.'

Carlo, not without a pang, as he remembered how at first sight of those copper-plate words, 'Avvocato Carlo Poerio Donati,' he had felt himself the happiest man in Naples, handed the card to his friend, and Enrico, crossing out the 'Avvocato,' scribbled above it the words, 'Knight-Errant.'

Sardoni glanced at it with a smile.

'You couldn't have put the case more tersely,' he said, rising to go, because he thought the two friends would rather talk out the matter alone. But before he turned he glanced searchingly at Carlo, and again surprised on his face the look which had perplexed him before.

'Does the fellow actually take pleasure in giving up his life to the service of that chit?' he thought to himself as he walked away. 'If ever there was a common-place, uninteresting woman in the world, it is Anita Merlino; she'll not even have the grace to be grateful to him.'

Late in the afternoon of the following day, Carlo, returning from a long lesson with Piale, happened to meet, in the Piazza Municipio, a handsome English sailor whose face seemed familiar to him. He glanced hastily at the name embroidered on his jersey, and read the word *Pilgrim*. With a great hunger in his heart to know Francesca's whereabouts, he turned and accosted the man.

'So the *Pilgrim* is still here,' he said, courteously. 'When does she leave?'

'To-night, sir,' said the sailor, looking pleased at the recognition. 'Captain Britton and the young ladies came on board an hour ago, and we are only waiting now for the caterer; and there he comes yonder.'

Carlo, glancing round, saw another of the yacht's crew, a bluff-looking, elderly man, whose duty it was to buy the food for his mates.

'We shall sail now as soon as we get on board, sir,' said the coxswain. 'Can I take any message for you?'

'None, thank you,' said Carlo, and bidding the man a courteous farewell, he turned quickly away. Hurriedly he walked towards the Strada Nuova, and looked across the blue waters of the bay. There was the *Pilgrim*, anchored to the Military Mole, her beautiful white sails all set, and only waiting for the return of the dinghy to raise anchor. Carlo saw the little boat threading its way between the vessels in the harbour, saw it round the yacht and disappear, then descried Oxenberry's lithe figure springing on board. For a few minutes all seemed haste and confusion; he could hear the rattling of chains, and could even make out the figure of the steward seated on the capstan with his concertina, while the sailors heaved up the anchor, swinging merrily round to the familiar strains of the 'Shanty.' Their hearty voices reached him even at that distance, and he remembered how as a child Francesca had proudly taught him to sing the 'Shanty' with a proper English accent. Fragments of the words seemed now to float across to him, and the tears started to his eyes.

'Hurrah, my lads! we're homeward bound,  
We're homeward bound for Plymouth Sound;  
Up with the sail, and off goes she.  
Good-bye, farewell! good-bye, farewell!'

The cheerful old tune seemed to him now like a dirge,—the dirge for his old life which was passed and over, the dirge for his betrothal so swiftly ended.

All at once his heart began to throb wildly, for he saw a slim, dark figure come on deck with a white shawl wrapped about the head and shoulders. Francesca stood with her face turned towards him, looking to the shore and away from the sailors, whose merry song, perhaps, brought to her mind the very thoughts it had suggested to Carlo. He gazed



on, hardly knowing whether the sight comforted or tortured him, but, in any case, unable to move, unable for one instant to relax the strain.

At last the song ceased, the chain rattled no more, the yacht began to move, and Francesca shifted her position a little, but still kept aloof from the rest, still gazed shorewards. And thus she remained while the summer wind filled the white sails, and the *Pilgrim* glided out of the harbour, gently, proudly, but relentlessly, moving out seawards.

To the very last, his eyes rested on her till the slim, black figure became a mere speck in the distance, and finally was lost to sight. He lingered still for the last glimpse of the *Pilgrim's* sails, on which the afternoon's sun glinted with dazzling brightness; then, when those, too, had disappeared, he became conscious of a creeping chilliness, which obliged him to grope his way to one of the seats and wait till he had recovered his self-control.

It was a vision of Piale's reproachful face which finally roused him. What would be the Maestro's horror could he see his pupil sitting there regardless of the dangerous hour of sunset, which was fast approaching? He drew himself together and walked slowly back to the Palazzo Forti through the narrow, picturesque streets, so familiar, but now so desolate to him. Never in his life had he felt so hopelessly lonely as when he mounted the dirty stairs and reached the suite of rooms which, for the time being, made his home.

In the ante-room Gigi was crying piteously; in the *salu* Merlino, in one of his worst tempers, was arguing with Anita; while Gomez, who had just arrived from Seville, stood glowering darkly at the new baritone.

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## CHAPTER XVI

## ON THE STAGE

'For ill can Poetry express  
Full many a tone of thought sublime ;  
And Painting, mute and motionless,  
Steals but a glance of time.  
But, by the mighty actor brought,  
Illusion's perfect triumphs come ;  
Verse ceases to be airy thought,  
And sculpture to be dumb.'—CAMPBELL.

PIALE had gained the wish of his heart, but, like many other people, he discovered that, when gained, it proved more of a care than a pleasure. He had plotted and planned, he had argued and persuaded, and now at length his best pupil was really to appear on the operatic stage, but nevertheless the old Maestro was far from happy ; he was haunted by the conviction that Carlo's health would give way, for he knew him too well not to perceive how sorely the events of the last few weeks had taxed his powers of endurance. It was all very well for him to prescribe perfect quiet when the hours of study were over, but he knew that at the Palazzo Forti quiet was not likely to be found—know that wherever he went Carlo would be haunted by the spectre of his vanished happiness. Often did he anathematise Captain Britton and the insular prejudice which had cost his pupil so dear ; often did he rack his brains for some means of cheering the *débutant*.

Carlo was, indeed, very much altered ; for the time he lost the boyish look which had always before been one of his characteristics ; he lost, too, his fresh, ruddy colour ; and, whereas he had hitherto been habitually gay, and only upon occasion grave, he was now only cheerful when, by a deliberate effort of will, he forced himself to be so. It was not in those first days of his trouble that he could all at once attain to the serenity of a perfectly disciplined heart. He was human, and he was very young ; the light of his life had gone out, and he did not always acquiesce in the darkness,—did not, except in rare intervals of comfort, feel anything but an aching void, an unconquerable longing for his own will to be done.

Not being of a self-tormenting nature, however, he did not trouble himself much about the right or wrong of his feelings ;

as far as possible he ignored them, and went on deliberately with the everyday business of the life he had chosen. Piale worked his voice as hard as he dared, and the professor of declamation taught him all that he had the power to teach; but Carlo, altogether dissatisfied with the scanty attention paid to acting on the operatic stage, studied his characters with a minute faithfulness which occupied him even in his times of so-called leisure; he was incessantly studying, incessantly observing, and, after three weeks of this sort of work, his heart began, as it were, to thaw; the personal grief which had held it frost-bound was softened by the wide love of the human family, which cannot fail to be quickened in the heart of anyone who truly observes life. For to observe truly you must sympathise with those you observe, and to sympathise with them you must love them, and to love them you must forget yourself. Without a deep, living sympathy the artist surely degenerates into a species of vivisectionist, for

‘To be observed when observation is not sympathy  
Is just to be tortured.’

Carlo soon found the happiness which comes to the worker who is really suited to his work. He learnt to be very grateful to his newly-chosen profession, for it brought him hours of forgetfulness, it raised him above the atmosphere of petty misery which seemed to prevail at the Palazzo Forti, it made him conscious that he had not chosen his life with headstrong blindness, but that he had gifts for which he was responsible,—gifts which made the life of a singer his true vocation. In those days of his trouble he worked with all his might, and the tremendous effort of memory he had to make stood him in good stead, and forced him to keep his grief at arm’s length.

Piale saw with relief that he was apparently not in the least nervous, that he was entirely free at present from all fear of failure, but the old Maestro was too experienced a hand to imagine that this calmness would last.

‘You go to your ordeal with a better heart than most *débutants*,’ he remarked one day, looking curiously into the face of his pupil. ‘But you have good reason to be cheerful about it, for you are safe to be popular.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Carlo, with a smile. ‘I am told that ten to one Comerio will organise a *claque*, and try to get me hissed off. I’m not at all confident of being popular, but I know that I have in any case to be a singer.’

‘There speaks the true artist,’ said Piale, with enthusiasm.

‘Did I not tell you long ago that Nature meant this for your calling?’

‘Yes, dear Maestro,’ he replied, quietly. ‘And you were right, and I was wrong, as events have proved.’

Piale hardly understood all that he meant; he looked up at him again with the lingering, scrutinising, anxious gaze of a painter who takes a last look at a finished picture.

‘If only your health is equal to the life,’ he exclaimed, with a sigh, for he could not but admit to himself that during the last few weeks there had developed in his pupil’s face a look of constitutional delicacy, which, after all, was a natural enough inheritance to the son of Signora Donati.

But Carlo laughed lightly, and put the suggestion aside.

‘Why, Maestro,’ he exclaimed, ‘I have never been ill in my life; and surely, if my sister has been able to bear the work all this time, you need not fear for a tough fellow like me!’

‘Well, I hope you will understand as well as Madame Merlino how to take care of yourself,’ said Piale, in the tone of a doubter.

As he walked home Carlo for the first time studied the placards which announced a second series of operas at the Mercadante, with the Company of Signor Merlino. On Tuesday evening Gounod’s *Faust*, and, below, a list of the characters:—‘*Faust*, Signor Sardoni; *Mefistofele*, Signor Merlino; *Valentino*, Signor Carlo Donati; *Wagner*, Signor Gomez; *Margherita*, Madame Merlino; *Siebel*, Mlle. Borelli; *Marta*, Mlle. Duroc.’ Just above was pasted a narrow strip of yellow paper, contrasting boldly with the pink placard, and upon this, in large black letters, was printed,

‘DÉBUTTO DI SIGNOR CARLO DONATI.’

He was startled and rather ashamed to find that the mere reading of the announcement made him tremble from head to foot. At the next opportunity he questioned Sardoni.

‘How do people feel at their first appearance?’ he said, with an air of curiosity, which was nevertheless a little anxious.

‘Oh!’ said Sardoni, with his careless laugh. ‘Some feel as if they were going to be hung, others as if they were entering one of the chambers of the Inquisition. Comerio, I believe, used to say that he had suffered more acutely when he went to be married, and Bauer declares that it was not half so bad to him as a visit to the dentist.’

‘And you?’ asked Carlo. ‘How did you feel about it?’

‘I hardly know—besides, I should be no guide to you, for

we are as different as chalk and cheese. I think I was in too dare-devil a frame to feel at all.'

'I can understand better to-day how Valentino felt before his first battle,' said Carlo, musingly.

Sardoni laughed.

'I do believe you think of your parts night and day!' he exclaimed. 'I declare I'm half afraid of you. You will be so much in earnest that you'll kill me in the duel scene, and that would be awkward. What do you say to a private rehearsal now? It's as well you have to fight me and not Gomez, for he hates you like poison; and what could be easier than to stick you by mistake on the stage, and get you out of his friend's way?'

'What with you and Piale it will be hard if I don't turn into a coward and a valetudinarian,' said Carlo. 'The Maestro does nothing but fear the breakdown of my health, and you are always warning me of hidden dangers from Comerio and his allies.'

'We only wish to instil a little prudence into your knight-errantry,' said Sardoni.

The change of baritones had been much discussed in Merlino's Company, and Carlo had to run the gauntlet of criticism, while feeling bewildered at the endless introductions to his new companions; he thought he should never learn to know them all, and the fact that he was Madame Merlino's brother was not in his favour, for Anita was not popular, and Carlo was sufficiently like her in face to make them prejudiced against him. Moreover, they all regarded him as a sort of amateur, and were inclined to resent his sudden change of profession, while Comerio's unexpected dismissal was by some deemed unjust.

His heart failed him a little at the thought of casting in his lot entirely with these not very congenial people; even in Domenica Borelli he was disappointed, she seemed to him cold and reserved and exclusive; he supposed that the very qualities which repelled him seemed to Sardoni's English eyes recommendations. Marioni, the conductor, received him with mingled coldness and anxiety; and had it not been for Sardoni's friendship he would have been in a most uncomfortable position. But all this improved after the first rehearsal; the conductor speedily thawed, and he began to understand better the stiff armour of propriety in which Domenica Borelli encased herself, and the alarming American frankness of Mlle. Duroc.

And so at last the great day came. Carlo awoke to the consciousness, but was surprised to find how indifferent he felt about it ; perhaps he had been through too much of late to suffer very greatly from apprehension, or perhaps he had not yet realised how great the ordeal would be. In the most matter-of-fact way he inspected his hat, hose, and shoes, the only part of his costume which he had to provide for himself ; then, having arranged that they should be sent to the theatre, he found himself with the rest of the day on his hands, for Piale had given strict orders that he was only to sing for half-an-hour just before he dined. Suddenly he bethought him of his old friend Florestano, and he felt a desire that the old fisherman should witness his first appearance ; so, taking the delighted Gigi with him, he went down to the Piliero, hired a boat, and was rowed to the old fisherman's hut. Florestano, who had all an Italian's love of the theatre, was delighted and flattered at the proposal, and they rowed back with him to Naples, where Carlo took him to the Mercadante that he might choose his own seat ; then, with many good wishes, the old boatman went off to his Socialist club, and Carlo having taken Gigi home, returned once more to the Mercadante, begged the keys from the doorkeeper, who was just about to take his *siesta*, and, locking himself into the empty theatre, began to pace the stage, going through, in dumb show, all that he would have to do in the evening. Still he felt strangely indifferent, and he began to think that his nature must be a very prosaic one, not realising that strong feeling often takes the form of numbness for a time.

Sardoni watched him on his return with the greatest curiosity ; he practised his scales for half-an-hour, dined composedly, read the *Piccolo*, played ' *Tombola* ' with Gigi, and did his best to avert a quarrel which was brewing between Gomez and Merlino. Finally he went off to the theatre with Piale and Enrico Ritter, and seemed to be so much occupied with cheering the old Maestro, who was in a pitiable state of nervousness, that he had little time to think of himself.

' *Giusto Cielo !* ' exclaimed the old man, ' I would give all I have were this night's work well over.'

And as they went down the stairs Sardoni heard Carlo's rare but delightful laugh as he rallied the Maestro on his depression. Apparently Piale had been advised that it would be better not to be behind the scenes, for when Sardoni reached the theatre he found Carlo alone in the dressing-room which they were to share.

'I thought I should have found your Maestro coaching you up to the last minute,' he exclaimed; 'it is well he has gone, or his nervousness would have infected you. At present you look as cool as a cucumber.'

'Only metaphorically,' said Carlo, throwing down the book he had been studying; 'this room is like an oven.'

'You'll find that is always the way,' said Sardoni; 'they bake us in summer and freeze us in winter, and, whenever they can manage it, poison us with bad drainage.'

The dresser began to urge him to be quick, for as usual Sardoni was behindhand, and had allowed barely time to scramble into his complicated double costume before the call-boy came to summon him. Carlo, who did not appear till the second act, seeing how matters were, and pitying the dresser, who only grew more stupid the more Sardoni swore at him, offered his help, and won the gratitude both of the Englishman and the Italian.

'Now if I'd had Gomez in here he would have made confusion worse confounded,' said Sardoni, rushing off in response to a second summons and the alarming news that the overture was ended.

When he returned at the end of the first act he found Carlo almost ready, standing with the patience of a martyr while the dresser put the finishing touches to his costume. He made a wonderfully handsome and soldierly-looking Valentino in his crimson velvet doublet, the conventional amount of stage armour, and the picturesque plumed hat which added so much to his height.

'Tan-coloured tights!' exclaimed Sardoni; 'that is an improvement on Comerio's get-up; he always insisted on sky-blues, in which he looked like a circus-rider.'

The remark roused Carlo from the state of abstraction in which he had for some time been wrapped, and, turning round with a smile, he asked whether the house was good, and if Sardoni had been well received.

'The house is crammed,' replied the tenor, 'but at present rather cold. Your appearance will stir them up.'

'The Signore will be a great success,' said the dresser, already won by Carlo's patience and courtesy.

'He carries a brave enough front,' said Sardoni; 'I should not have thought you would prove such a cool hand.'

'Ah, well! it is the first battle of the campaign,' said Carlo, with a laugh; 'let no man boast till he has been under fire.'

'*Per Dio!* no battle, but a triumph,' said the dresser, as he left the room. 'Best wishes for your success, signore.'

Carlo thanked him, and began in a practical, matter-of-fact way to study the construction of the sword which had to break in two at the challenge of Mephistopheles. Sardoni, to amuse him, told him stories of various stage *contretemps*, and was just marvelling at his companion's perfect composure when Donati suddenly started forward and grasped his arm.

'They have begun the Kermesse chorus!' he gasped.

And then at last the realisation broke upon him: he was, after all, Carlo Donati, a novice, with a terrible ordeal before him, and failure would mean ruin. All recollection of his part seemed to leave him. He looked distracted.

'Come and wait at the wings,' said Sardoni, 'and take a look at the audience. You are sure to do well. Keep up your courage, *amico mio*.'

'If it were only fame which depended on it, or only myself——' he faltered, 'but to fail means the ruin of all our plan.'

'You will not fail, you will succeed, and your plan too; it deserves to. Come!'

With kindly persistence he took his arm and drew him towards the door. The noise without seemed to bewilder Carlo; the orchestra, even at that distance, sounded deafeningly loud in his ears; the clear, joyous chorus of the citizens seemed to mock his wretchedness; he dragged himself on in obedience to Sardoni, who took him to the green-room, where they found Anita and Merlino. Nita was crying, and wiping away her tears with anxious care lest they should make too much havoc with her rouge.

'Here is my wife more upset over your *début* than she was over her own,' said Merlino, more pleasantly than Carlo had ever heard him speak before. 'Come, Nita, see what a fine figure he cuts as Valentino. You may well be proud of him.'

Carlo glanced down at her, vaguely noticing her white dress, her long plaited hair. She did not make up well as Marghérta, and he dreaded acting with her because she recalled to him the terrible stake for which he was playing.

'Give me your good wishes, Nita *mia*,' he said; and then, disgusted to find how his voice trembled, he turned away and followed Sardoni to the wings. Sick and dizzy he looked out across the crowded stage with its skilfully-grouped soldiers, and students, and citizens, to the section of the house which could be seen. His breath came in short, quick gasps, and his fingers



played nervously with his sword-hilt. Sardoni felt intensely curious to see how he would get through his task.

'*Mestier Divin ! Mestier Divin !*' shouted the soldiers, and Carlo's fingers tightened on the sword. He became at last able to think of nothing but that the chorus was drawing nearer and nearer to an end, and that at the close would come that dead silence in which he, Carlo Donati, must cross the stage and either fail or succeed. His dresser approached him.

'The charm, signore ? You have it all right ?'

'I have it, thank you,' he replied, and unclasped his hand, where the medal burnt like fire.

'It will soon be over,' said Sardoni, cheerfully.

'I know,' he gasped, his lips almost refusing to frame the words.

'Oh,' said Sardoni, 'I meant the ordeal, not the chorus. Look to your goal ; that's the only way with a high jump or with this sort of business.'

It was all very well to talk of looking to the goal, but just then Carlo was hardly able to see with his bodily eyes much less with the eyes of his imagination. The crowded stage became misty and confused to him ; he could no longer distinguish the faces in the audience : they were just a terrible, criticising, impersonal mass.

'*Inutil sarà !*' sang the sopranos.

'*Al primo apparir !*' roared the basses.

And then came the mocking strain once more from the orchestra as the concluding bars of the chorus were played ; and all his life long that sweet, blithe air seemed to Carlo like the merriment of Punchinello the clown, who jested with an aching heart. The last chord was crashed out, his hour was come ! With a supreme effort he moved forward, and, as the opening bars of his recitative were played, walked mechanically through the little lane which opened for him in the stage crowd. He believed that he must have walked slowly, but his feet seemed no longer his own ; he felt as if he were nothing but throbbing heart and bounding pulses, and it was only from force of habit, after so many rehearsals, that he moved to the right place, his eyes fixed on the medal in his hand, which in reality he was too much dazzled even to see.

Suddenly an inspiration came to him. Valentino, too, would be oppressed, troubled, by the merry-making crowd ; what did he, with his grief and anxiety, want with all this publicity ? He was Valentino—he breathed, thought, looked, and felt like Valentino ; and in a voice subdued and sad, but so

clear and sweet that it reached to the remotest corner of the gallery, he sang the brief recitative, '*Oh, santa medaglia!*' as he placed the charm on his heart, then glanced quickly, distastefully, at the gay throng surrounding him.

There was a burst of applause which instantly made him feel *en rapport* with his audience. He advanced to greet Wagner and Siebel, while to Piale and Enrico, in the theatre, and to Nita, at the wings, there came a pang, as Valentino told how he was sad because he was leaving his sister, who had now no other protector; and to many of the audience it was comprehensible that the new baritone's voice should tremble as he uttered the words, '*Mia madre piu non è.*'

Already he had the sympathies of the house, but the test of his success would be in the song, '*Dio Possente,*' and for this Piale waited in trembling expectation. He need not have feared, however. Not one of the audience had ever heard anything to equal the devotional fervour of the prayer for Margherita's safe keeping, or the manly outburst of martial ardour succeeding it; the song, both in conception and rendering, was perfect; and the Italian audience, which would not have scrupled mercilessly to hiss him had he not altogether pleased them, broke into applause so enthusiastic that Piale hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry, so great was his emotion. The song was vehemently encored, and Carlo's reputation was established.

Even when he was not singing his was the figure upon which all eyes rested, for he was the one man on the stage who was actually living his part; while, in the scene where he drove back Mephistopheles with his cross-handled sword uplifted, and sheltered the retreat of the soldiers, his impassioned assurance that the cross was all-powerful against evil stirred every heart.

'That is a piece of symbolism quite after Carlo's fancy,' remarked Enrico Ritter. But for once he did not grumble at the attack on his beloved theory of egoism. He joined in the tumult of applause; and when, at the close of the act, the new baritone was called again and again before the curtain, Enrico felt a thrill of pleasure which he did not take the trouble to analyse.

Meanwhile, Carlo was like a different being; he knew that he had truly found his vocation. The music, the success, the applause, had excited him to the highest pitch, and the sympathy he met with from everyone astonished him. Only Gómez held sulkily aloof and said not a word, but the rest were warm

in their congratulations. Merlino, with the triumphant sense of having secured a first-rate singer at an unusually small salary, was quite benevolent and fatherly; while, perhaps, Domenica Borelli's words pleased him more than all.

'You are the first real actor I have ever sung with, signore,' she said, in her grave, low voice. 'You have taught me much to-night.'

Piale was at last persuaded to return to his place in the audience; and, as Sardoni was pretty constantly on the stage, Carlo was left to himself during his rather long waiting time. He was glad to be alone; he wanted time to realise the great happiness which was still left for him in his darkened life. The sense of having given pleasure to those hundreds of people was in its novelty almost overpowering; and yet, in all his excitement and happiness, there was an under-current of fear, which made him again and again repeat the words, 'Not only with our lips, but in our lives.'

For though the artist has his triumphs, yet there must always mingle with them the humbling perception of his own incompleteness, the sense that as yet his personal life is far from being the 'true poem' he wishes it to be.

There were other thoughts, too, which made him grave; this night's work might, he hoped, prove to be one good, decisive blow in the warfare he was waging for Anita's deliverance, but it also meant his more complete severance from Francesca; with a sigh he wondered if any news of his success would reach her.

All his nervousness had now disappeared, and when once more he went to the wings his heart beat high with hope, and the inspiring march roused every soldierly instinct within him, contrasting strangely with the Kermesse Chorus which had so jarred upon him as he waited for his first entrance.

Once more his acting carried all before it. The pathos of his happy ignorance, his eager welcome of Siebel, and his breathless inquiry for Margherita, his utter absence of suspicion, and his martial enthusiasm, appealed to everyone. Then, when at last Siebel contrived to hint to him that all was not well, his agony of suspense as he questioned the boy, and his grief and despair when he learnt all the truth, though it could be conveyed alone by look and gesture, moved the people to tears.

Merlino's creditable rendering of the 'Serenata' received less notice than might have been expected, but the audience

were eagerly awaiting the reappearance of the *débutant*, and the passionate indignation of his meeting with Faust and Mephistopheles seemed to stir all hearts. Other baritones had sung Gounod's music well, but this man not only sang magnificently, but transformed himself into Valentino, giving them by his genuine dramatic talent such a notion of the character as they never had before, and out of a comparatively small part creating the chief interest of the opera. Breathlessly they watched the duel which, for once, seemed real and life-like. The avenger had the sympathies of the house, and when, mortally wounded, he staggered to his feet again in pursuit of his foe only to fall a second time, there were few dry eyes in the theatre, for into the mere dumb action he had infused a rare pathos, and had made them understand the strong vitality that yet lingered in the dying soldier.

Both the singing and the acting in the death-scene were exceptionally fine; the mingling of wrath and grief, denunciation and reproachful love, which he managed to convey in his last words with Marghërita, appealed to all, while at the end he produced a novel effect. With panting breath, and with more of sorrow than of anger, he sang, '*Tu morrai tra cenci vil.*' Then, suddenly diverted from the present, he pressed to his lips the cross on his sword-hilt which one of his fellow-soldiers held towards him, and afterwards turning again towards Marghërita with a look so beautiful that once seen it could never be forgotten, sang with a depth of tenderness the brief—'I die for thee,' kissed her bowed head, with a sort of triumphant resignation gasped the last—'Like a soldier I die!' and fell back lifeless.

Feeling much more like Valentino's ghost than like himself, he went forward again and again to receive the plaudits of the people; then, warned by Merlino that he would certainly be called for at the close of the opera, he flung on his own hat and cloak over the Valentino costume, and with an irresistible craving for fresh air and darkness rushed from the theatre. At the stage-door he encountered Piale and old Florestano.

'Why, my friend,' he exclaimed, turning to the fisherman, 'you will miss the best part of the opera.'

'It's nought to me now, signore,' said the old man; 'it ended for me at your death. I'll take my boat at the Piliero and be starting home.'

'I will walk part of the way with you,' said Carlo.

And with Piale on his other side, he strode along, drinking down deep breaths of the cool night air, and realising with a

relief indescribable that the horrors he had been living through were, after all, not real.

Never had hope been so strong within him as when he parted with old Florestano and walked back with Piale to the Mercadante. He had left behind him despair, and gloom, and failure—they seemed to have died with Valentino, while within him there had arisen a buoyant expectation—almost an assurance—that his work would not be in vain, that Nita would be saved. Francesca's sweet voice seemed to be saying to him again and again, '*l'azienda! l'azienda!*' while the very first sound that reached him on returning to the theatre was the chorus of angels with their ringing cry of '*È salva!*' Then, when the final chorus, '*Cristo risuscito,*' had died away into silence, he heard amid the clapping loud cries for 'Donati,' and with what the Italians call '*una stretta al cuore,*' he led Anita before the curtain, and once more received the plaudits of his fellow-citizens. Behind the curtain, the very scene-shifters and carpenters were eager to congratulate him; Marioni, the conductor, was ready to swear an eternal friendship; Merlino beamed upon him complacently; Piale shed tears of happiness; and it became evident that Carlo, for the time being, would prove the idol of the Neapolitan world.

Next afternoon, when by sober daylight he read the accounts of his first appearance in Enrico's office, his friend, with a cynical smile, exclaimed, 'Your head will be turned with all this triumph.'

And then suddenly there flashed upon Carlo the vision of what he had forfeited. He was too simple-hearted, too genuinely honest, not to enjoy to the full his artistic success; but he thought to himself there was not much fear that the man who had lost Francesca Britton would be dazzled by such delights as public approval can bring.

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## CHAPTER XVII

## A FAREWELL

'Here once my step was quickened,  
Here beckoned the opening door,  
And welcome thrilled from the threshold  
To the foot it had known before.

Ah me ! where the past sowed heart's ease,  
The present plucks rue for us men !  
I come back ; that scar unhealing  
Was not in the churchyard then.'—LOWELL.

THE summer season at the Mercadante was over, Piale and Merlino were well satisfied with its result, and the Neapolitans talked of little else but their new baritone. They were justly proud of him, and grumbled sorely on learning that he was to leave them for an indefinite time. Carlo, during the series of representations, had studied hard, appearing as Rigoletto, as Count Rodolpho, as Plunketto, as Guillaume Tell, as Enrico, as Figaro in the *Barbieri*, as the Conte di Luna, and twice in his favourite character of Valentino. It was with a feeling of deep regret that, on the morning after his final appearance, he awoke to the recollection that it would be long before he should again sing to an audience of his fellow-citizens.

Gigi, who had a provoking habit of waking very early, had for some time been amusing himself with the flowers and wreaths piled on the table, and now, sitting on the edge of the bed, was trying to crown himself with one of the laurel wreaths, which continually baffled his efforts by slipping down on to his neck.

'Never mind, my Gigi,' said Carlo, laughing. 'It is too big for both of us. We must grow to our crowns.'

'Did they give them to you last night? How lucky you are! I wish people threw me such nice things.'

'I throw them to you,' said Carlo, making a long arm and tossing one trophy after another across to the child.

Gigi laughed with delight.

'Will they alluse give you such a lot, do you fink?' he asked, anxiously.

'No ; make hay while the sun shines,' said Carlo, adroitly throwing a wreath so that it alighted on the child's brown head. 'Crowns and enthusiasm will not be met with out of Naples.'

With a sigh he recollected that he had but one more day left in his native country. His heart felt very heavy as he wondered how long it would be before he again set foot on Italian soil, and he began to consider what he should do with the time which remained to him. Nita had promised to go with her husband to see one of his relatives in Sorrento; therefore he was quite free to do what he pleased. He lay musing sadly, glancing now and then at the funny little figure on the other bed sporting about in the tiniest of nightshirts among the flowers and laurels.

'Well,' he reflected, 'it will be a black day for me. I'll do what I can to make it bright to the child.'

'Gigi,' he said, 'I am going to Pozzuoli to-day. Will you come with me?'

Gigi sprang to his feet and executed a *pas seul* of ecstatic delight.

An hour or two later they had reached the familiar little town with its domes and campaniles, its irregular white houses, its groups of antiquity-sellers, and its air of quiet, picturesque decay. Carlo wandered through the well-known streets, feeling like a ghost returned to its old home.

Every now and then he would be stopped by some passer-by, and questioned and congratulated, but the return made him realise more than he had yet done how entirely he had separated himself from his past. Gigi was crazy to see the boat-building, and they stood for some time on the beach, in the very place that had been Carlo's favourite haunt as a boy; then they made their way to the Villa Bruno, and wandered about in the garden, and finally went to the house to ask for some water for Gigi.

'I made sure you were the Count, signore,' said the peasant in charge. 'He said he should be coming to see the place again to-day.'

'What Count?' asked Carlo, quickly.

'Count Carossa, signore. He has been twice to see the Villa, and they say he is sure to take it now.'

Carlo knitted his brows.

Why did Count Carossa choose to settle down in so out-of-the-way a place? If he wanted a summer house, why did he not choose one at Portici or Posilipo? And then, like lightning, there flashed through his mind the recollection of the Count's eagerness to know Captain Britton, of his prompt acceptance of the invitation to dine at Casa Bella, of his evident admiration of Francesca. Even at the time he had

wondered sorrowfully whether Captain Britton's patience would long prefer the claims of a poor and absent lover, to the importunity of the dozens of wealthy suitors who would doubtless besiege him with offers for his daughter's hand.

If Count Carossa really chose that house,—a house which in itself had no special recommendations,—he should regard it as a positive proof that he was in love with Francesca. And, if so, what might not follow? A vision rose before him, which would not so readily have presented itself to an Englishman, and he realised how attractive the handsome, wealthy nobleman would be to such a man as Captain Britton. He took up the tumbler of water which Gigi had relinquished, and hastily drained it; then he took the child back again to the garden, and threw himself down under an acacia, still with that distasteful vision before his eyes, till a sudden recollection of Uncle George's fine English face came to his aid.

'I am a fool!' he thought. 'Whatever the Captain's faults, he would never be false to the traditions of his country. A forced marriage might well be among our own people, but the English feel very differently about such matters. Mr. Britton would do all that could be done to prevent it, even if the Captain had been too much taken by the title. And for the rest—should Francesca ever wish it—why, then, there would be nothing to be said. In that case'—he smiled, because in his heart he was so perfectly sure of her unchangeable love—'in that case I suppose I should wish it myself, since her happiness would be mine.'

With a sigh, he dismissed vague fears for the future, but the undeniable sorrows of the present were not so easily laid aside. Once more he lived through his last meeting with Francesca,—once more he recalled all that she had said to him in the Temple of Venus, and then saw again in imagination the solitary black-robed figure on the deck of the *Pilgrim*. If only he could have borne it all for her! But in that lay the really hard part of the lot he had chosen; he had deliberately made the choice which involved suffering, not only for himself, but for another.

It was hard, there was no gainsaying that; it was hard to think of leaving this dear, familiar garden, with its lovely glimpses of Ischia and of the blue sea in between; it was hard to leave the place where his happy childhood and boyhood had been spent; but it was far harder to think that Francesca would be left with an aching heart in the midst of all this loveliness, that the very beauty of the place would but remind



her of past happiness. But then there came to his mind one of those golden maxims of Mazzini which had already done much to shape and colour his life: 'Ever act—even at the price of increasing her earthly trials—so that the sister-soul united to your own may never need, here or elsewhere, to blush through you or for you.' At least, he had tried so to act; he had gone forth in a good cause, and with a reasonable hope of success. And yet even now his temptations were not over, for, as he lay there in the shade watching Gigi, who was chasing a white butterfly down the moss-grown walk, there spoke to him the very devil himself, disguised under a specious show of common-sense and worldly wisdom.

'Have you not, after all, been unintentionally unjust?' urged the tempter. 'Are you not making the innocent suffer for the guilty? Surely there must be a screw loose there—injustice can never be right! A word of warning to Merlino would have been quite enough to induce him to send Comerio about his business. Why should Francesca suffer in order to save Nita from a disagreeable scene with her husband, which she deserved?'

'But then,' he reflected, 'I could only have told Merlino through a deliberate breach of Nita's confidence. She would never have trusted me again; she would never have understood that I longed to help her; Comerio would have seemed her only protector; she would have been driven desperate, and would have gone to him. Would not Francesca have had cause to blush for me then? There could have been no happiness for us bought at such a price as that—besides, it would have been wilful disobedience to what I was told to do.'

It had been a sharp encounter, but he had worsted his foe, and was left strong in the possession of that *mens conscia recti* which had helped to bear him up through Captain Britton's insults and remonstrances, and Uncle Guido's anger. Moreover, there came to him one of those intervals of comfort which make all sorrow worth while, and he knew that it would be thus, too, with Francesca.

'San Carlo! San Carlo!' shouted Gigi, tearing up the path towards him. 'I've caught it at last—just you see!'

His rosy face beamed with happiness, his eyes shone, and in his fat, little, brown hand he clasped the white butterfly.

'A souvenir of a happy day, and the first butterfly for our collection,' said Carlo, showing Gigi how to dispose his treasure in one of the orthodox little boxes.

The child threw his arms round his neck.

'I do love you so!' he exclaimed. 'There was no collections, or treats, or anything nice at all till you came.'

Before long, Gigi discovered that he was hungry as well as thirsty. They had wandered along the deserted Baja shore in search of more butterflies, and the only place where food was to be had was the little Hotel de la Reine, to which they accordingly repaired, Gigi sturdily climbing the outside staircase and entranced to find a number of peasants seated at the inn table in the one available room. It was a *festa*; they all seemed very merry, and though the child could hardly understand their dialect, he liked to watch them; and indeed, though it made Carlo feel more than anything had yet done that his home was indeed gone, this visit to the wayside inn was not a little amusing to him. The breakfast itself was odd enough to make him laugh. First came some dubious-looking oysters from the Lucrine lake, and a long roll of sour bread of quite a venerable age. Then came a dish of eels and *spigali*—the latter fairly eatable; this was followed by macaroni mashed with tomatoes, which was quite beyond Gigi's fastidious American palate; and, to crown all, there arrived an omelette soaked in rum, and a dish full of very grim snow to cool the *chianti*.

'I guess it's the queerest breakfast I ever had,' said Gigi, at the close.

'It is our last in Italy,' said Carlo. 'Come, let us drink to our return;' and laughingly he clinked glasses with the child, and pushing the flask of *chianti* towards the peasants, begged them to share it. Then, to Gigi's delight, everyone clinked glasses, and all the peasants were eager to drink with San Carlo; and there was such bowing, and smiling, and good fellowship, as he had never before seen. Afterwards, amid much laughter, some game was begun, and Gigi, seeing that they all seemed to be counting their fingers, thrust out his brown little hand to the amusement of all present.

'What is it? Whatever are they doing?' he asked, laughing delightedly just because everyone else laughed.

'What! don't you know how to play *mora*?' exclaimed Carlo; 'you shall be initiated. With your permission, ladies and gentlemen, we will join your game!'

And so they did, and Carlo's enjoyment of the very mild diversion would certainly have surprised any onlooker who knew his story.

While they had been eating, a shabby-looking fellow with a guitar had been playing to them, and a hungry-eyed boy of

fifteen had sung in a hard, tired, monotonous voice, one after another of the familiar songs of the country.

A sudden impulse seized Carlo, perhaps the doleful, unmelodious voice annoyed him,—perhaps he only yielded to his natural love of giving pleasure, but suddenly he sprang up, motioned to the musicians to take his place and finish the *chianti*, and taking the guitar, burst forth into one of his favourite national songs.

The host and hostess came running into the room to listen. It was whispered from one to another that the singer was none other than Signor Donati, the famous new baritone, and the merry peasants listened entranced. At the close there was quite a babel of thanks and applause.

‘My friends,’ said Carlo, ‘to-morrow I leave Italy, and I have a great wish to hear once more Garibaldi’s hymn sung as I know you can sing it,—will you join in the refrain?’

‘We will! we will!’ cried the peasants, excitedly.

He struck a few chords on the guitar, and then broke out into the soul-stirring hymn, and with one accord the men and women sprang to their feet and joined in the chorus.

Gigi, not at all understanding what it was that excited everyone so much, slid down from his place at the long table and stood looking out of the open window across the lovely Bay of Baja, then glanced back into the room as once more the peasants shouted the refrain. He wondered what it could be that moved them so much, wondered why San Carlo’s eyes shone with so bright a light, and why there was such a funny thrill in his voice as he sang the final verse of the song—a thrill which sent a sort of indescribable tingle through the child’s veins and made the tears start to his eyes.

‘What was it all about?’ he asked, as after a chorus of farewells, and thanks, and good wishes from the peasants, Carlo took his hand and led him away from the little inn. ‘What could it have been about, San Carlo, that you should all look so eager?’

‘It was about *La Patria*,’ said Carlo, gravely.

‘Then that is why it made me tingle so,’ said Gigi, with a pleased look on his comical little face. ‘I really am Italian, though Signor Sardonì will call me a little Yankee. They was Yankees at Salem, and I don’t want now to go back to Salem. I mean to be an Italian alluse, and stop with you.’

‘What!’ said Carlo, with a laugh, ‘have you proved faithless to your old friends the pigs?’

‘I don’t want pigs now that I have got you,’ said Gigi.

'I hope,—I do hope they won't never send me back to Salem!'

Carlo laughed.

'Since you are so fond of your country, it is a shame you should leave it without seeing the *tarantella* danced. Come with me, little one.'

He led the child through a vineyard, spoke a few words to a peasant girl who appeared to know him, and soon Gigi found himself in a vast, grey, domed building, in which Carlo woke the echoes for his amusement. It was an old Roman ruin called the 'Temple of Mercury.' Presently the dark-eyed peasant girl came back again, followed by two younger and prettier sisters, and by an old woman in a very dingy, ragged dress, brightened by an orange handkerchief upon her head. She carried a guitar, and, leaning against the wall, she began to chant a monotonous air and to play in excellent time, while two of the barefooted girls began to dance the *tarantella*, relieved every now and then by the third, who took her turn while one of the beginners rested.

Gigi was delighted, and indeed the scene would have had charms for most people,—the weird-looking old ruin, which echoed loudly to the twanging guitar, the picturesque group of peasants who had sauntered in to look and listen, the stoical-looking musician, and the pretty peasant girls with their exquisitely graceful movements and their white feet twinkling through the mazes of the dance. Gigi clapped his hands and danced, too, for happiness, so that even the stolid old guitar-player nodded complacently at him, and the merry girls laughed, and danced with more spirit than ever, as if they enjoyed it with all their hearts.

The remembrance of the scene lingered long with Carlo. For days the familiar air rang in his ears, and the harsh voice of the old woman, as she chanted,

*'È la luna mmiezu mare  
Mamma mia maritame tu.'*

Slowly they wandered back to Pozzuoli, passing through the familiar Piazza, pausing beside the fountain under the trees to speak to the philosophical-looking lame beggar, who had been a boy with Carlo, and was now eager in his congratulations. Then they made their way to the cemetery, that Carlo might visit the grave of his father and mother for the last time, and place upon it some of the wreaths and flowers he had received

at the Mercadante. Gigi took much interest in this, and connected no sad thoughts with the graveyard.

'I do so like cemeteries; I think they are such lovely places,' he said, happily. And as they walked between the graves he trotted along, contentedly chanting to himself the refrain of a game which he had learnt in America, 'Here we come gathering nuts in May,' so that Carlo could not help smiling, even in the midst of his sadness.

'There is one more pilgrimage I must make,' he said, as he drove back to Naples, 'and you shall come with me, little one,—you shall not leave Italy without seeing Carlo Poerio's cap and blouse.'

'Who was he—a saint?' asked Gigi.

'He was a patriot, one who loved his country and suffered for it. And they shut him up in prison for years and years, and treated him cruelly, and would have killed him had they dared, only the people loved him so much.'

'And did he get away from prison?'

'Yes, he got away. They were going to send him to prison in South America, but he managed to escape, and they never caught him again. My father knew him and loved him, and that is how I came by the name of Carlo.'

'I wish my name was it too,' said Gigi, wistfully. 'I wish they had called me after that brave prisoner.'

'Never mind; you were named Bruno, after my father, you know.'

'Was he a patriot?'

'Yes, indeed he was.'

'But they didn't put him in prison, did they?'

'No, but they killed him—wounded him in battle. He died for Italy.'

Gigi looked awed, and with a sort of fearful delight gazed up at St. Elmo, which they were approaching. Carlo led him into the disused monastery of San Martino, to the room which he had visited, year by year, ever since he was Gigi's age, and there, within a glass case, they saw the red blouse and the cap which Carlo Poerio had worn in prison.

Gigi heaved a portentous sigh.

'I wish they hadn't been so cruel to him,' he said, wistfully.

'How ever did he bear it, do you think?'

'He thought about freeing his country from the bad men who were cruel to him and to the others; he loved Italy better than himself, and thought only of saving her.'

'Did no one come and see how cruel they were to him

in prison?' asked Gigi. 'I wonder God didn't send some one!'

'Some one did come at last, a brave Englishman who was not afraid to speak out and make the world listen.'

'Is that why you are so fond of Englishmen?'

Carlo smiled. 'That is one reason.'

'What was the Englishman's name?'

'His name was Gladstone.'

'It's an easy name. I guess I'll remember it,' said Gigi, to the amusement of a party of English tourists who were passing by.

'It is a name very dear to Italians,' said Carlo. 'But now, my Gigi, we must be going home.'

'I'm glad we came to see it,' said Gigi, taking a last look into the glass case, 'but it's a dre'ffly shabby old coat, isn't it?'

'Come here,' said Carlo, 'there is one more thing you must see.'

They followed the English tourists and went out on to a little balcony which hung right over the cliff, and from which could be gained a most wonderful bird's-eye view of Naples. The tourists went their way, but Carlo lingered, looking with loving eyes at that vast expanse of white houses, with its lovely background of sea and mountain. Posilipo to the right, Castellamare and Sorrento to the left, and, out in the distance across the blue waters, Capri, made yet more beautiful by a rainbow which seemed to span it. How he loved it all! How lingeringly his eye dwelt on the domes and minarets below; how wonderful that vast subdued roar of the city sounded in his ears! To leave this place was, to him, as bitter as death.

Silently he walked back with the child to the Palazzo Forti, found that Nita was still at Sorrento, and went to seek Enrico that he might spend his last evening with his friend. Between ten and eleven Enrico returned with him, and the two made their way together up the long staircase.

'I will come in and see your friendly Englishman once more,' said Enrico, 'and will say good-bye to your sister, if she has come back.'

But Nita and her husband were still out, and Sardoni had gone to the San Carlino; Carlo, however, fancying he heard his voice in the *sala*, entered quickly, receiving a severe shock when he saw that Gomez was not, as he had fancied, talking to the tenor. Seated at the table, facing the Spaniard, was a man with a high, rounded forehead from which the closely-cut hair

receded so much that in profile the effect was most curious, so large was the expanse of pallid face, so small the expanse of dark, silky waves. The nose was hooked, the expression very quiet, the eyes cold, but capable of lighting up, for as soon as the stranger became aware of Carlo's presence a gleam kindled in them, and, turning to Gomez, he said politely, but with a smile which made Carlo shudder, 'Pray introduce me to my rival, that I may have the pleasure of congratulating him on his great success.'

Enrico wondered whether his friend would refuse to be introduced to Comerio. For an instant Carlo seemed startled out of his presence of mind, and there was a perceptible pause before he determined that his only plan would be to ignore what he really knew to Comerio's discredit and meet him, as far as was possible, like an ordinary stranger. For Nita's sake he must control the anger which the mere sight of the fellow had stirred up in his heart.

'Perhaps,' said Gomez, with his usual stolid gravity,— 'perhaps Signor Donati does not care to be introduced to so formidable a rival.'

The speech, which had been intended to put Carlo in a still more awkward predicament, signally failed, for with ready courtesy he seized it and turned it to his advantage.

'As a rival I decline to be introduced to Signor Comerio,' he said, in the pleasantest manner imaginable. 'There can be no question of rivalry between a veteran and a novice; but as a fellow-artist I am happy to make his acquaintance.'

He bowed. Comerio, with hatred in his heart and a smile on his lips, bowed in reply; the two men exchanged a few remarks on musical matters, and before long Comerio took leave, owning himself beaten. There was undoubtedly something in Donati's imperturbable courtesy and fearless honesty which baffled his malice.

As Sardoni had remarked, however, Comerio was not a man who could be beaten with impunity; he was a man who would have his revenge in the end, even if he had to nurse it for years, and Carlo felt this as he parted with him, and understood why the Englishman had spoken so strongly and had recommended caution. His foe was no mean antagonist, there was a 'no-surrender' look about him, a sort of indomitable persistence stamped upon his pale face, and the future looked to Carlo darker and more perplexing after that meeting with his enemy.

Enrico tried, without much success, to rouse him from his

depression, and Carlo, fully understanding his intention, tried hard to turn his thoughts to other matters.

Just at the last, he asked hesitatingly for the one thing upon which he had set his heart.

'You will sometimes see the Brittons,' he said, his voice trembling ever so little; 'write and tell me about it when you do, *amico mio*.'

'Of course,' said Enrico, shortly. Then, after musing for a minute over the situation, '*Madonna Santissima!* it makes me mad to think that both you and Miss Britton should be sacrificed to such a fiend as Comerio.'

'Write long, write often,' pleaded Carlo. 'Tell me everything,—the least thing about her.'

## CHAPTER XVIII

### FRANCESCA'S AUTUMN

'And did she love him?—What if she did not?

Then home was still the home of happiest years,

Nor thought was exiled to partake his lot,

Nor heart lost courage through foreboding fears,

Nor echo did against her secret plot,

Nor music her betray to painful tears;

Nor life become a dream, and sunshine dim,

And riches poverty, because of him.'—JEAN INGELow.

'TELL me all about it over again, Florestano; I think you have made a mistake in choosing to be a fisherman. You should have been a professional tale-teller. Tell it me all over again from the very beginning.'

The old fisherman pulled his red Phrygian cap lower over his wrinkled forehead, shook back his grizzled locks, glanced up at his brown sail to see that all was well, then looked across at the sweet, eager face opposite him, and felt willing enough to obey the request.

Neither the healthy life on board the *Pilgrim*, nor the weeks among the Swiss mountains which had followed it, had been able to keep the colour in Francesca's checks; she was as pale as a lily, and almost as fragile-looking, but the mouth and eyes were as sweet as ever, and betrayed nothing of her story. She sat in the stern of the little fishing-boat and listened to the



old man with half-averted face while they sailed homeward, letting one of her long white hands trail through the water, and looking steadily down into those dark blue depths as once more Florestano repeated the story of Carlo's first appearance.

'*Gran Dio!* he is good as a piece of bread!' exclaimed the old fisherman. 'Who but he would have thought of coming all the way out here to fetch a shabby old fellow like me, and giving me a fine place at the theatre, where I could see as well as those who carry a heavy purse, and are too fine to walk on foot, and spend their days in idleness? He came, signorina, bringing with him the little boy, his nephew.'

'Was he looking well?' asked Francesca, still keeping her face turned away.

'*Ebbene*, signorina! he was grave and quiet, doubtless thinking of the evening, and now I come to think of his face, I remember it was browner than it was wont to be; he had lost his colour, being shut up so much studying.' Florestano could hardly help smiling to himself, because he thought he had given these reasons with such an admirable air of conviction. 'But except for that he was just like himself, signorina, just like. He would take an oar on the way back to Naples as if we were back in the old times, and I was rowing him to school once more, as I did for many a year in the warm weather. And then, when in the evening I saw him stand on the stage, with all the people praising him, and he looking so fine in his velvet dress and his sword, then I did feel proud to think that only a few hours back he had taken my oar from me that I might rest a bit. He couldn't have treated me better, signorina, if I'd been his own father.'

'And the people applauded him a great deal?' asked Francesca.

'*Capperi!* you may believe me, signorina, the noise made my head ache for days after. How he bore it I don't know, but afterwards, when they called for him, he came before the curtain looking as modest and natural as if he were but just an ordinary man in his own home, and bowed as though he were pleased that we had found pleasure in his acting. And when I went to thank him and take leave I came upon him just at the stage-door, and he said he wanted a breath of fresh air, for the theatre had been nearly as hot as the crater of Vesuvius; and he walked with me down to the Piliero till I could have thought he had been a boy again: he seemed so like himself that I could hardly believe 'twas he that had been Valentino a few minutes since, with all the house crying over his death.'

'Then he acted very well?'

'He just made it real, signorina! *Gran Dio!* I can never forget his face as he drove back the devil with the cross, stepping out boldly before the old soldiers as though he feared nought. 'Twas fine to see the old devil cringing and backing! I can tell you, signorina, that I came away that night believing in the old faith once more. There's more in the Cross than they would wish to have us think down at our club in Naples.'

Francesca thought she would have liked to tell her father that story, but Carlo's name had never passed between them since her betrothal had been ended, and she knew that she would not be the first to break the silence.

Comforted and yet saddened by her talk with the old fisherman, she was set down on the beach and made her way through the vineyard to the familiar olive-garden, where she found Sibyl helping two or three peasant women to gather the olives. There was something which soothed her in the silvery shade of those gnarled old trees; she sat down on the grass, leaning against one of the terraces, and watched Sibyl's little blue-clad figure fitting hither and thither, and the peasants in their sombre stuff gowns and gay handkerchiefs tied over their heads. Under one of the trees a baby had been laid on a tattered old shawl, while close by its mother, busy with her basket of olives, sang a quaint little Neapolitan song to keep it quiet. The air was quite familiar to Francesca, but she had never before caught the words, and listened now attentively as the mother sang:—

*'Ah! com' è bella la mia Bimba,  
Quando parla e quando ride,  
Quando meco ella deride,  
I sospiri del mio cor.  
Questo giglio innamorato  
Bimba mia chi t' hai la dato?  
O capisco t' el donava  
L'innocenza del tuo bel cor.  
Bella Bimba! Bella Bimba!  
Tu sei l' angelo d' amor.'*

The chorus, with its light-hearted repetitions of '*Bella Bimba,*' brought the tears to Francesca's eyes, but the baby, tired of lying on the ground, began to cry, and with the natural instinct of helpfulness, which was perhaps her strongest characteristic, Francesca sprang up and begged leave to nurse it. Then, as she paced to and fro with her little white-capped charge, hushing it to sleep with one of Carlo's songs, she realised as

she had never done before that to tend the children of others is the sacred right of every childless woman ; and somehow her world, which had seemed just before so hopelessly narrowed, broadened out again, and looked less dark and dreary.

Presently the peasants finished their work and went away. Francesca gave the sleeping baby to its mother, and, taking Sibyl's hand, strolled homeward.

'Why, who can be here?' exclaimed Sibyl, 'some one talking with father. Look!'

Francesca's heart leapt into her mouth, for she caught sight through the trees of a panama hat exactly like Carlo's. In an instant a hundred wild hopes and conjectures had passed through her mind, to be all too quickly dispelled, for as they drew nearer Captain Britton came down the path to meet them, and she saw that the panama hat belonged to Count Carossa. For a moment she could not help hating him ; what right had he to take Carlo's house, to dress like him, to walk down that path which was for ever associated in her mind with the day of her betrothal? It was all she could do to greet him as usual.

'I find Count Carossa is going in to Naples this evening to the ball,' said Captain Britton, 'so I have offered him a seat in our carriage. What time had you thought of starting, Fran?'

Francesca had thought of going early and returning early, but quickly realised that Count Carossa would probably stay late, so she proposed that they should go an hour later than she had first intended, and, without being discourteous, managed to seem perfectly indifferent as to the arrangement. The Count was piqued by her manner ; she was the first pretty foreigner he had ever met who was not willing to flirt with him, and he was determined to win her. She was obliged to promise him a dance, to stand by and look polite while her father invited him to dinner that evening, and later on even to accept some white azaleas which he brought with him from the Villa Bruno, not at all understanding that the mere sight of them would recall to her the image of her absent lover, of whose existence the Count had no idea.

He was a good talker, and the Captain was delighted with him, while for the present he was very willing to spend most of his energies on his host, leaving Francesca unmolested, and enjoying the sight of her as she sat at the head of the table, looking exquisite in her white dress and with the flowers nestled against her snowy neck. Something had brought a

faint tinge of colour to her cheeks ; perhaps it was that the Count had asked a few innocent questions as to the former inhabitants of the Villa Bruno, or perhaps it was vexation at the thought that she had been obliged to accept his flowers. She felt certain that her cousin Kate would have managed to avoid accepting them, would have framed some quick and dexterous reply, or thought of a good excuse. But no way of escape had suggested itself to her : to have refused them point-blank would have been both rude and prudish, and though she disliked the Count, yet she was too innately courteous to tolerate for a moment anything which would needlessly wound the feelings of another. And then, with a sudden pang, some Italian phrase spoken by the visitor recalled Carlo to her mind, and she remembered how short a time it was since he had sat in that very place at the table, and the tears would well up into her eyes. She had become of late, however, rather an adept in the matter of managing tears. She knew to a nicety how far they might rise without being noticeable, and both to her father and to the Count she seemed a very self-possessed little hostess, only intent on making everything easy and pleasant.

The Captain had with a ponderous effort turned the conversation from the Villa Bruno, but after a while the Count innocently reverted to it.

'I suppose you, like all the rest of the world, were taken by surprise by Signor Donati,' he remarked, readjusting his table-napkin, which had slipped out of his collar, and failing to note the expression of the Captain's face ; 'they say no one had any notion that he sang at all, so strictly had Piale kept him.'

'He never sang out of his own house,' said Captain Britton, trying desperately to make his voice and manner natural, and not daring to look at his daughter. 'But I have heard him sing there. There was a song of Piale's which he used to sing ; Piale has written some very pretty things, and this had the merit of having English words. Let me see, what was it called, Francesca ?'

He had seldom felt more flurried and uncomfortable ; he fancied the Count could read all that was passing in his heart, and in despair he tried to turn the conversation to Piale's music and appealed for help to Francesca, though he knew that it was cowardly to do so.

'It was called "Love for a Life." The words were Tennyson's,' said Francesca. 'Do you read English at all ?' she asked, turning to the Count.

Then, as he began to lament his ignorance of her native language, her heart, which had been beating wildly while she replied so composedly to her father's question, grew quieter and even felt a little glow of justifiable satisfaction.

'I managed that rather well,' she thought to herself.

Captain Britton, grateful for her help, and admiring her calmness all the more because it contrasted with his own blundering speech, seized the next chance for intervening with his favourite story of how he had met the Laureate at Lord Blanton's, and by the time that was ended Francesca was able to leave the dining-room.

'After all,' she thought to herself, 'to hear his name is better than silence. If father had not been there, if I had been just alone with some one who didn't know, it would have been a sort of comfort even to hear him spoken of. I wonder if the Count went to hear him? I wonder if he really admired him? I wonder if he will perhaps talk about him at the ball to-night? I hope he will, and yet—— and yet I half fear it. Could I possibly manage my face? If he praised him could I look just as if Carlo were any ordinary singer? If he found fault could I help growing angry? Why,' she laughed to herself, but with more of sadness than mirth, 'Carlo's turning actor has forced me to turn actress! Oh, my love! my love! I wonder where you are! I wonder what you are doing! I wish,—oh, how I wish we weren't going to this ball to-night! To be forced to dance with a heartache is about as pleasant as to be forced to eat with a headache.'

But Francesca changed her mind when she entered the ball-room an hour or two later, for the very first person she caught sight of was Enrico Ritter. Hitherto, to tell the truth, she had rather disliked Enrico, had even been a little jealous of him, grudging the time which Carlo spent in his company, and resenting his habit of spending long days at the Villa Bruno. Now he seemed to her the only man in Naples worth looking at, and she thought how delightful his blunt, uncomplimentary, almost rude manner would be after Count Carossa's veiled love-making, which, with its familiar Italian, would seem to her like a horrible parody of Carlo's.

When she came into the room Enrico was at the far end talking to some Americans whom Francesca knew by sight. She felt almost certain that he saw her, and waited in trembling hope for his approach; but he never came, and before long she was surrounded by a little throng of worshippers, and her card was speedily filled. When Count Carossa had written his

name there was only one vacant place for the waltz which followed the *cotillon*.

'Will you not let me have this one, too?' he asked, beseechingly.

She avoided his eager, brown eyes, and glanced quickly in Enrico's direction. He was making one of those profound, awkward-looking bows of his to a pretty little Neapolitan, and she felt a conviction that he did not mean to ask her to dance. It was hard to be avoided by the one man in the room whom she desired to talk to, and persecuted by the one she most wished to avoid! She felt angry with Enrico and angry with the Count, and though she seldom asserted herself her spirit rose now, and she said, quietly—

'Thank you; I shall not dance after the *cotillon*.'

'You are quite right; it is a tiring affair. But you will permit me to sit out with you, signorina?'

'I wish his eyes were green, or grey, or anything but brown,' thought Francesca to herself, naughtily. 'I wish he was French, or German, or anything but Italian!' Then aloud, 'No, I don't think I shall make any promises. But perhaps I shall sit out with the partner I happen to choose in the *cotillon*. We will see how things arrange themselves.'

She smiled, and there was the least little touch of coquetry in her manner, for which she hated herself. But, then, what was a poor girl to do in such a predicament! Must she throw away her sole chance of hearing about her lover for the sake of sitting out with his rival? If the Count was conceited enough to think that she meant to choose him in the *cotillon* it was surely no fault of hers; but he evidently did think so, and she somehow felt vexed with herself, and yet was unable to see how she could have acted differently. She foresaw a time of trouble, since men would be provoking enough to fall in love with her face, and it was clearly impossible that she should go about the world labelled with the notice,—'This is to certify that the heart of Francesca Britton is given to one Carlo Donati, and therefore no lovers need apply.'

However, she had not much time to think over the difficulties in abstract, she was obliged to dance, and smile, and listen to dozens of pretty speeches, and when most bored by them to reflect, 'Enrico is here, and will certainly know all about Carlo. Enrico is here, and there is yet one chance of a talk with him.'

The excitement and the eager hope made her happier than she had been for a long time, and, moreover, the mere exercise

was doing her good and bringing the colour to her cheeks ; although she had hated the thought of the ball beforehand, she was too young and too genuinely fond of dancing not to forget her grief every now and then, and really to enjoy it much as Sibyl might have done.

All this time Enrico had watched her critically. At first he had intended to ask her to dance, and to write and give Carlo a faithful and particular account of every word she had said. But when he saw her surrounded by admirers, and dispensing her favours with the unconscious dignity of a little queen, then something like resentment began to stir in his heart, and he wondered whether after all she deserved Carlo's devotion, whether it was even remotely likely that she would be faithful to him.

He was angry with her for looking so lovely, and for smiling so charmingly ; with all his philosophy he never once asked himself the question, how was she to help it ? He was angry with her for being admired by other men, and angry with her for looking happy while she danced, and he hugged his old conviction to his heart—'There is no such thing as love in the world ! all is selfishness under the sun.' And yet, though he professed to hold firmly to his creed, he longed to-night to see it falsified ; he would have liked, at any rate, to think that his friend and the beautiful English girl were those strange exceptions which, according to the proverb, prove the rule.

At length the *cotillon* was danced, and the time arrived when Francesca, the acknowledged *belle* of the evening, was seated in the middle of the room with a mirror in her hand, while those who were eager to be her partners went up one by one behind her, and looked over her shoulder so that their faces were reflected in the glass. If she refused them, she threw her handkerchief across the mirror, and it seemed to-night as if no one pleased her, for one after another was rejected, and Enrico was enchanted to see the look of confidence with which Count Carossa had approached her changed to undisguisable chagrin as he retired into the ranks of the refused.

'Go and try your chance,' urged a voice in Enrico's heart. But he reflected that it was well enough to see other men rejected, but not so pleasant to be refused oneself.

'For Carlo's sake,' urged the voice ; 'it is your sole chance of talking to her.'

Much against his own inclination he moved forward and looked grimly down upon the mirror. His face was so funny

a contrast to all the worshipping faces which had preceded it, that Francesca could have found it in her heart to laugh at it had she not been so happy and relieved. To the astonishment of everyone, including Enrico himself, she made the sign of acceptance, and with the proud sense of possession his good-humour returned, and he was ready to believe nothing but good of her.

'I thought you were never coming,' she said under her breath, when talking was possible.

'Did you wish for me?' he asked in his cold, rather sarcastic voice. 'I thought you were far too well provided with cavaliers to care for so indifferent a dancer.'

'You ought to have known that you were the one man in the room I should care to talk with,' she said quickly, stung by his tone, and by the perception of what he must have thought of her. But the next moment she half regretted her words, for Enrico's whole face changed and he lifted his eyes to hers with the look in them which she could not bear to see, save in the eyes of the man she loved.

'I thought you would tell me of Carlo,' she said, determined to speak out boldly, though she would have preferred a more quiet place for the talk. 'Have you heard from him?'

'Three times,' said Enrico, recovering his usual manner.

'Ah! so often!' she exclaimed, with mingled jealousy and pleasure in her tone.

They were interrupted for a minute or two by the necessity of attending to the dance. In the next interval he saw that the jealousy had given place to unclouded satisfaction, and it was almost in the tone of her old childish days that she said, 'Oh, you will tell me all about him, will you not? You are his friend, I know, and for his sake you will still be mine, I hope.'

'Indeed, I will,' he said very kindly, 'if you will let me. You never liked me in the old days; I daresay I was very disagreeable.'

'No, it was my fault,' said Francesca. 'I was so jealous of you because you took up the time, and I was afraid he cared for you more than me, but now—but now I am not jealous any more.' She laughed a little, and glanced up at him with a humorous look in her dark grey eyes.

'I would do anything to serve you,' said Enrico. 'I cannot help still thinking of you as one who belongs to Carlo, and for that reason your slightest wish shall be a command to me.'



'Thank you, you are so kind; you understand so well, Enrico,' she replied, quickly adopting the tone of brotherly and sisterly intimacy which he had carefully instilled into his last remark. She was very grateful to him for putting in that saving clause, 'for that reason,' and dismissed for ever from her mind the fear which had seized her not long since that Enrico was going over into the tiresome ranks of her adorers. He was going to do no such thing; he was going to be to her just the strong, kind, brotherly friend she needed. .

'I am glad it is over,' she exclaimed, as the music ceased, 'do let us get somewhere away from all these people. Are you engaged for the next dance?'

'No,' said Enrico, hardly knowing whether to be amused or charmed by her unconventional frankness.

'Ah! I am so glad, for I saved it on purpose, and made Count Carossa so cross. Please, please sit out with me somewhere and tell me about the letters.'

Enrico in his secret soul felt a thrill of pride as he reflected that the belle of the evening had besought him to stay with her. Then all selfish thoughts faded away in admiration of the love which made shy, timid Francesca so innocently bold, so delightfully unlike the girls whom he was in the habit of meeting in society.

He led her into the conservatory, which was prettily hung with Chinese lanterns, and here, at the far end, they discovered a charming little nook, with a rustic seat half hidden by ferns and flowering plants.

'I will send you the letters to read if you like; I could always do that,' began Enrico.

'No,' she said, with a sigh, 'I don't think it would be right, for my father made me promise not to write to him or receive letters from him, and that would seem like a sort of subterfuge. But it can't be wrong to hear about him now that we have met at last. Where did he write from?'

'The first letter was from Malta; he seemed fairly cheerful, made great fun over the colourless island, and grew very patriotic over his comparisons. I am afraid he feels his exile a great deal. You see he is such a thorough Italian; all his interests are bound up with the country. Then, too, he was a good deal pained because those idiots down at the Circle of Social Instruction—the club, you know, in which he had always taken so much interest—quite misunderstood his turning public singer, upbraided him with his desertion of the cause—much they knew about it!—and called him frivolous

and self-seeking, just as if they were a parcel of English Puritans, if you will pardon the comparison.'

Francesca sighed. 'It seems as if all the world were against him.'

'But that is what such knight-errants must expect,' said Enrico.

'I can't see why,' said Francesca, sadly; 'of course they would expect the evil to be arrayed against them, but when their fellow-soldiers turn upon them that seems hard. Still I think he was prepared for it; he counted the cost before he set out,—not that that makes it any easier to bear.'

'He wrote again from Gibraltar, where they seemed to have had a busy time,' continued Enrico; 'and then again he wrote on board the steamer and posted the letter in England, so they are safely there, though the letter, being posted on landing, gave no particulars as to his first notions of the country.'

Francesca was silent for a minute, the bare, dry facts were so unsatisfying, she wanted to know all the little details, she longed so terribly to see the letters themselves. Enrico partly understood, but found it impossible to come to her help. He had had no idea that it would have proved so hard to give any coherent account of his friend's long letters. While he was racking his brains for some quotable sentence, he became aware of voices at a little distance beyond their leafy screen; he heard the word 'Donati,' and then, as the speakers drew nearer, the whole conversation became distinctly audible.

'Well, his uncle is furious about it,—disowned him on the spot.'

'You mark my words, Badia, there's a woman in the case. For all Donati's high reputation I would stake my life on it. These fellows who set up for being moral, if once they are touched, go to greater lengths than we should.'

'For the matter of that,' remarked the other, 'it is likely enough he should turn singer with such a voice; magnificent! the finest baritone I ever heard.'

'*Corpo del diavolo!* you are as innocent as a child, my friend! Would a man throw over a fortune, and a good match, and a profession to boot? Besides, see how quickly it was all arranged! One week we were congratulating him on being an *avvocato*, the next this fair unknown had lured him on to the stage.'

'What about a match? I heard nothing of that.'

'I assure you I have it on the best authority that he was

betroted to Miss Britton, and left her for the sake of the fair unknown.'

'*Capperi!* This is truly a chapter from a romance! Let me see, who was there in Merlino's Company? The little De Caisne, do you think? or Domenica Borelli?'

The reply was inaudible, there came a sound of laughter, then the voices died away in the distance.

Enrico had been on the point of dashing forward to put a peremptory stop to the malicious gossip, but the recollection of Francesca's presence made him pause. To discuss the matter before her was out of the question, and even had she not been there it would have been almost impossible to interfere to any purpose, so cunningly were the falsehoods interwoven with the truth. He was so angry that at first he could not spare time to look at his companion, but when the speakers had left the conservatory he turned to Francesca, an indignant exclamation trembling on his lips. The exclamation was never uttered, however, for the sight of her face almost choked him; it was bathed in tears, of which she seemed unconscious, for she made no effort to hide them; her hands were tightly locked together, and the tears rained down over her lovely pink and white cheeks. She had not stirred since their conversation had been interrupted, her face was still turned to his, just as it had been when he told her of Carlo's letters. Enrico longed to rush after the slanderers and crack their skulls together; he had never in his whole life felt so savage and yet so tender, so eager to comfort and yet so conscious of his own unfitness.

'Don't heed those brutes,' he entreated. 'After all, you know every public character is exposed to this sort of thing; and really, upon my soul, if one were not so angry one would be obliged to laugh at such an absurd notion.'

Francesca did not speak, but she was recalled to the present, and made an effort to stop crying.

Enrico thought she had never looked so lovely before, and felt that her tears were making sad havoc of his philosophy, and that, in self-defence, he must do what he could to check them.

'See,' he began, in his kindest voice, 'if you go back to the ball-room presently, and people notice that you have been crying, it will make an opening for more of this infernal gossip.'

'Yes,' she said, with a quiver in her voice which made his heart ache. 'I had not thought of that;' and hastily drying her eyes, she raised them to his, all bright and shining, and

pathetic as the eyes of a little child in trouble. 'Do you think it shows much now?' she asked.

Enrico was no lady's man, he neither perjured himself to please her nor evaded the question by a compliment, as many would have done. He looked gravely into those dark, grey depths, and critically at the wet lashes fringing them.

'It does rather,' he said; 'but we need not go back yet, they are still dancing.'

'How sad the music sounds!' she said, with a sigh; 'and yet it is a waltz I used to be so fond of. It seems as if those hateful words had taken the sweetness out of everything.'

'Don't think of them!' exclaimed Enrico. 'After all, you know it is but the way of the world. People would be dull if they did not invent little scandals of this kind. Carlo has done an altogether unprecedented thing, has actually loved his sister better than himself; but the world can't look into his heart, and naturally, after its invariable custom, credits him with low motives.'

'It is just that which makes it so hard,' said Francesca. 'I didn't think they could have been so cruel; people, too, who must really have known him. How can they—how can they think such things? All his life gives the lie to it!'

There was a silence; the music rang out more distinctly; it seemed to say to Francesca: 'After all, 'tis a hollow kind of merriment, but we are bound to go on. The fiddler is longing to go home to his dying wife, but he must play on to the end! And the dancers have aching hearts, but they must dance, dance and be merry. This is pleasure, you know, the world's pleasure!'

'You see,' said Enrico, 'the world has always been very kind to you, and so you have been deceived. People naturally make much of you, and that, of course, is pleasant.'

'I don't think I can ever enjoy anything again,' said Francesca, with the firm conviction of two-and-twenty that the particular cloud in its sky is going to prove more powerful than the sun.

But there was, nevertheless, some truth in her remark. She would enjoy again, but never in the same way; she would enjoy as a woman, but never again as a happily-ignorant girl.

'Everything seems hollow and unreal,' she went on; 'I have believed in it all so much!'

'You must not let me convert you to my creed,' said Enrico, with a smile, 'or how could I ever face Carlo? It is an odd coincidence that while you, through this business, got

your first glimpse behind the world's scenes, and are disillusioned, I, in watching you and Carlo, have felt almost ready to throw over my pet theory of universal egoism.'

'What arguments you and Carlo used to have in the old days,' said Francesca, recovering herself, and feeling much cheered by his words. Then, with a little smile, she added, 'I have been talking just like a horrid old woman we used to know in England. I wished her a merry Christmas one day, and she shook her head and looked so glum as she grumbled out, "*Merry* Christmas indeed! there's no merriment in this world." I do hope I shan't grow like her.'

Enrico laughed.

'I shall tell Carlo that story when next I write. You will not allow me to send any message from you I suppose?'

'No, I can't do that,' she sighed; 'he knows I can't. But oh, Enrico, it is such a comfort to know that you write to him. Write often—promise to write often.'

Once again they talked over all the news in Carlo's letters, then, leaving the flowery retreat, made their way back to the crowded rooms. Francesca was speedily claimed by her next partner, and Enrico leant meditatively against the wall, watching the gay scene, and musing over that pathetic complaint which the girl had made to him, 'They have taken the sweetness out of everything.'

Years after, if any one had asked him what was the most touching sight he had ever seen, there would have risen in his mind a picture of that gaily-lighted ball-room, and of Francesca's sweet, sad face, upon which, spite of all her efforts, there yet lingered the traces of tears. Again and again she was whirled past him, her feet flew over the ground, but her face always bore the same expression, and he knew well that it was only a sense of duty which kept her up, and that she danced with a sore heart.

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## CHAPTER XIX

## IN ENGLAND

'And hast thou chosen then? Canst thou endure  
 The purging change of frost and calenture;  
 Accept the sick recoil, the weary pain  
 Of senses heightened, keener nerves and brain—  
 Suffer and love, love much and suffer long—  
 And live through all, and at the last be strong?

\* \* \* \* \*

Thou shalt need all the strength that God can give  
 Simply to live, my friend, simply to live.'

*On Art as an Aim in Life*—F. W. H. MYERS.

'*MORNING NEWS! Morning News!* Shocking murder at Mountford!' This cheerful announcement, in the harsh shout of a newspaper boy, awoke Carlo, one morning early in the autumn, to the recollection that he was in England. He started broad awake in a moment from dreams of Francesca and Casa Bella, and with a pang of realisation, to which he was now too well accustomed, knew that he was altogether parted from her, and looked with blank, hopeless, miserable depression round the unfamiliar hotel room.

It was one of those narrow, gloomy places often met with in inns; at the foot of his own narrow iron bedstead was a second just as narrow, and though the general impression conveyed was of meagre bareness in respect to the furniture, yet one felt cramped and oppressed by the proportions of the room.

'Soles and whiting! soles and whiting!' sang a nasal-voiced fishwoman in the street. And then, after an interval, came a cry so extremely comic that Carlo burst out laughing.

'Are you awake, San Carlo?' exclaimed Gigi, appearing, with the suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box, from beneath the clothes on the other bed.

'*Giusto Cielo!* what can the woman be calling?' said Carlo. 'Gigi, if you love me, jump out of bed and see!'

Gigi, nothing loth, sprang up and darted to the window.

'It's black things in a basket,' he announced. 'Oh, now I can hear what she says; it is "Pickled cockles! pickled cockles!"'

By the time the cry had died away in the distance Carlo was grave and depressed again, he tried to live through his dream once more and to forget the distasteful reality, while all

the time he was listlessly watching Gigi in the performance of his toilette, a sight which might well have tickled the gravity of an unaccustomed observer. Necessity had taught the little fellow to be far more handy than most children of his age, and now that Carlo had instilled into his mind the duties of cleanliness and godliness, his business-like way of setting to work was most edifying, beginning sedulously with soap and water, and ending with the Paternoster which Carlo had taught him in Italian.

The place seemed to grow less desolate as the child very slowly and deliberately repeated the familiar words, and Carlo's heart grew lighter. True, he had as yet made no way at all with Anita, and the future still looked black and unpromising, but at any rate Gigi was the better for the change of baritones, and what right had he to fear for the result of work which he had begun in obedience to a direct call?

'*Perciocchè tuo è il regno, e la potenza, e la gloria, in sempiterno. Amen,*' repeated Gigi; then springing to his feet, and relapsing into English, 'May I go down and play, San Carlo?'

Carlo patted the little brown head.

'Why, yes, to be sure, old man, take your soldiers and play in the coffee-room. I'll be down directly!'

Once up and dressed he began to look at life from his customary cheerful standpoint, and, with a curiosity which was almost boyish, drew up his blind and looked eagerly forth, for this was, in reality, his first glimpse of England, since they had landed quite late on the previous evening, in darkness and confusion indescribable.

'*Capperi!* what a land of chimney-pots!' was his first exclamation. And in truth the prospect from the window was one which to a Neapolitan would seem most extraordinary. The room was at the back of the hotel, and on the fourth storey; it overlooked a narrow by-street, and thousands of roofs, and from every roof there rose these extraordinary-looking chimneys; stout, red ones, tall and attenuated grey ones, square ones, with blackened tops, and here and there a grisly-looking cowl, whirling and creaking in the most gruesome way. The sky was grey and leaden, a strong west wind was blowing, and Carlo had not stood many minutes at the open window before he found that his linen had suffered severely from the smuts.

'What a melancholy-looking place!' he thought to himself; 'if I stay looking at it much longer the blue devils will get the better of me again, and that doesn't pay.'

He turned away, whistling '*O dolce Napoli*,' and reflecting that he would have some fun with Sardoni over his first impressions of England.

Sardoni was down before him, and was half-way through a substantial breakfast of ham and eggs, which reminded Carlo of the English breakfasts that Captain Britton had always refused to give up.

'You're late,' said the tenor, nodding to him. 'Had you come down a few minutes ago you would have witnessed a most interesting scene.'

'I am late because I have been admiring the beautiful view of chimney-pots from my room,' said Carlo; 'you should have prepared me for them, they quite took my breath away. What with the chimney-pots, and the pickled-cockles, and the soles and whiting, I'm already quite learned in English life.'

'San Carlo, mayn't I have some of that yellow stuff?' pleaded Gigi, who had been watching Sardoni's operations with hungry eyes.

'Yes, if you like; what is it?'

'Man alive!' cried Sardoni, laughing heartily, 'do you mean to say that you never saw marmalade! No Englishman dreams of breakfasting without it. There!' he almost emptied the pot on to his friend's plate, 'eat and be thankful, and own yourself a convert.'

'Delicious stuff!' mumbled Gigi, with his mouth very full, and heaving a sigh of satisfaction. 'Then, as his elders laughed, he added fervently, 'I should like to be alluse eating sweet things.'

'What has been happening?' asked Carlo, when the child had finished his breakfast and had gone back to his toys.

'Well, Marioni has been tearing his hair a little, and Merlino has been swearing much. He got out of bed with the wrong foot foremost, and I believe there is something gone amiss with the manager of the theatre here, or the orchestra or something. I really didn't hear the rights of it; all I know is that he ramped and roared a good bit, and that it ended with exit Marioni, left wing, tearing his hair, and exit Merlino, right wing, in a vile temper.'

'The fact is he tries to do too much,' said Carlo. 'A man can't be in himself impresario, singer, and business agent all at once. It's more than human nature can stand.'

'Certainly more than human temper can stand,' said Sardoni. 'However, he is not likely to have more officials than he can help, for he knows well enough that this English tour is



a frightful risk. And for the matter of that you are worth ten officials to him : you seem to me to take pleasure in being his slave.'

'I have liked him much better since I worked with him,' said Carlo. 'There is a sort of rough honesty about him, after all. I fancy that with a different education he might have been a fine character.'

'There's no denying anyhow that at present he's a fine tyrant,' said Sardoni. 'It's my belief that you would find excuses for the devil himself, Valentino !'

'Valentino' had become Carlo's nickname with the Company. One evening at Naples there had been a discussion in the green-room about an article in some journal on the merits of the new baritone, in which his 'Valentino' in particular had called forth the warmest praise, and was termed 'a new creation.' Gomez, who had never lost an opportunity of making himself disagreeable to the new comer, had turned to him with his contemptuous smile and said, 'I congratulate the Signor Valentino, and it is certainly true that he plays the part as though he were to the manner born.'

To Carlo and Sardoni, who were the only ones present who were capable of understanding the speech, a hundred hateful innuendoes were conveyed in look and tone ; but the others caught up the idea as though it had been a jest, and Tannini, drawing the sword which he wore in his costume of Ceprano, smote him on the shoulder and, with the most nasal of Yankee twangs, shouted, 'Arise, Sir Valentino !'

'Knight-errant,' put in Sardoni, seeing that it would be well to let the Spaniard's innuendo pass for jest.

And so, like the 'San Carlo' spitefully suggested by Comerio, 'Valentino' became a household word among the troupe and lost all bitterness, becoming, indeed, a sort of symbol of the familiar teasing, the playful fondness, which Carlo speedily won from his companions.

It seemed that Sardoni had not exaggerated matters in speaking of Merlino's temper, for at this moment he entered the coffee-room with the ominous double crease in his brow and the dark look about his eyes, which always betokened a stormy day for those in his immediate neighbourhood. At such times he was certainly a most repulsive-looking man, and at first Carlo had felt that he could not live with him, that the mere sight of him would be intolerable. By this time, however, he had somehow called into existence a sort of fondness for his brother-in-law : he had the rare and enviable gift of seeing

people as they might have been under happier circumstances, and the still rarer power of treating them as such; and so the constant society of the Impresario had been quite tolerable to him, or only intolerable at rare moments when his natural impatience overmastered him, and made him feel ready to break with everything and rush back to a peaceful life in his native land.

'So you're down at last,' said Merlino, who resented it as a personal injury if any one lay in bed after he did. As he had an inconvenient habit of always waking early, however late he had been the night before, his companions sometimes found this trait in his character rather provoking, particularly as with most people the career of an operatic singer does not tend to promote the virtue of early rising.

'I hear that Marioni has been in already,' said Carlo. 'What has gone wrong?'

'Everything!' said Merlino, savagely. 'I wish to goodness, that instead of lying in bed till this hour, you had been down at the theatre in the place of that blockhead!'

'Well, I will go now if anything can be done,' said Carlo, ignoring the rudeness and unreasonableness of the remark.

'*Insomma!* Much good now! That is so exactly like you, Donati, always ready with patience and cool common-sense over other people's difficulties! I know there would be a cursed difference in your tone if the difficulty were yours and not mine!'

Sardoni was on the point of breaking in with a remonstrance, but Carlo gave him a glance which made him hold his peace; and taking up a paper, he appeared to be reading the leading article, though in reality he was listening to his two companions. He remembered, not without certain twinges of conscience, that Carlo had been helping the baggage men and seeing after all the lost goods of the troupe, when he himself had turned in on the previous night: probably 'Valentino,' who was always seeing after other people's worries, had been the last of the Company to go to bed.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' said Carlo. 'How has Marioni managed to put his foot in it?'

'He declares the orchestra is not half ready, and he has been quarrelling with the manager about the rehearsals.'

'Ten to one he has made some mistake,' said Carlo. 'The manager is not likely to speak Italian, and Marioni's English is,' with a laugh, 'well, asking his pardon, is really grotesque. Just think now, the other day at Gibraltar I heard him talking

to an English violinist, and he said, "What! not are here no lockomoteeves?" The poor fellow could hardly keep his countenance! And then, too, there's no convincing Marioni that a gesture conveys nothing at all to the ordinary Englishman; he expects them to understand just as if they had been born and bred at Naples.'

Merlino smiled.

'There's something in that, after all. Perhaps it is not so bad as he makes out.'

'If you think it would be any use I will come round there with you now,' said Carlo.

'Well, I wish you would,' said Merlino, gruffly, 'for your English is better than mine. Oh! confound you! Never mind the child! He's well enough here.'

'Let me come with you, papa; I'll be so good—so good,' said Gigi, who a little while ago would infallibly have burst into tears at the prospect of this disappointment.

Merlino, who really loved his son, was touched by the entreaty, and made no further objection; so the odd-looking trio set off together, and Sardoni, throwing down his paper, stood at the window and watched them down the street with a comical expression about the corners of his mouth.

'It's as good as a play to see how that fellow can turn Merlino round his finger! And all the time the old brute treats him like a dog. I'm hanged if I understand how Valentino does it, and how he keeps his temper, for he's got a pretty hot one for all his sweetness. Jove! I should like just to poke the devil up in him for once and see what he'd do. He's none of your milk-and-water saints or he could never act as he does.'

But if to Sardoni, who held the key to the enigma, Carlo's character and life were perplexing, to the rest of the troupe they were altogether incomprehensible. Some of them admired him; others found his unselfishness convenient, and did not scruple to trade on it; others were jealous of his success, and suspected him of trying to curry favour with Merlino; and though before long all, except Gomez, had been so far conquered by the charm of his manner as to treat him with friendly familiarity, not one of them was capable of fathoming the beauty of his character. He was merely in their eyes a pleasant exchange for Comerio,—a youngster who, at present, seemed unspoiled by his success, a good travelling companion, who was always ready to make fun of petty discomforts, and who seemed quite naturally, and with an utter absence of

ostentation, to take upon himself the 'dirty work' of the Company.

It soon came to be considered just 'Valentino's way' to yield the comfortable seat in a railway carriage, or to leave the better room at a hotel to someone else, or with an unconscious air, which was often highly amusing, to act as safety-valve for the Impresario's temper. It was a very convenient way, there was no doubt about that; and his help seemed so spontaneous, and was so free from all suspicion of conceit or superiority, that it was indeed help worth having.

Nevertheless, like the art of an actor, all this seemingly natural and unstudied action was the result of sheer effort and often wearisome consideration; it was merely that Carlo succeeded, as very few do succeed, in veiling the effort and letting people perceive the result only. How hard he found life in Merlino's Company only he himself knew. With Nita his great love helped him to endure patiently, and Merlino came in for a share of this, too. But with the others who were not akin to him, who were many of them positively obnoxious to him, it was otherwise. Nothing but hard struggling with his own temper brought him through each day's difficulties.

Bauer would patronise him in a bland, superior way, pat him on the shoulder in season and out of season, embrace him in his fervent German fashion, and call him '*Mein Junge*.' And then, with his sensitive, artist nature all untuned, Carlo would wonder to himself whether it was pride or a right self-respect which made him inwardly rebel. How far was he bound to submit to the patronising familiarity of a greedy, conceited, irritating, underbred old German, whose presence jarred on him like a false note? Sometimes he tried to throw a sort of careful coldness into his manner towards old Bauer, but that only worked mischief. Then he tried to carry off all the petty annoyances with a laugh. This answered better, but, after all, the weariest thing on earth is forced merriment, and his own troubles were making him very heavy-hearted.

Again, there was Fasola, the second baritone, with his aggravating habit of reading a bitter meaning into the most innocent remarks, with his contemptible jealousy, with his determination to be aggrieved. Genuinely sorry for the man, and feeling that it must be hard to see a young novice in the place he coveted yet could by no means fill, Carlo went out of his way to help and please him; but Fasola, while accepting help readily enough, was the most touchy and querulous of

mortals, and always contrived to be at cross-purposes with the new comer, and to take offence on every possible occasion.

Then, too, Carlo was always confronted by the difficulty of how to be friendly, yet not intimate, with those who were no better than they should be. Domenica Borelli severely kept to the rule of not being on speaking terms with any one of whom she disapproved; but this way of cutting the Gordian knot did not commend itself to him, and he struggled on in the difficult endeavour to be courteous to those who were altogether distasteful to him, to steer between a weak tolerance and a priggishly expressed disapproval, to be true to his own principles and yet to avoid anything like Pharisaism. Hitherto he had been little accustomed to difficulties of this kind, for he had lived very simply and in a perfectly harmonious atmosphere. He was ashamed to find how the petty vexations chafed him, and often felt inclined to throw up everything and own that he had attempted something beyond his powers. This was generally late at night or early in the morning, when he was fagged and dispirited. But then, again, he would take heart and begin once more, with hope and courage springing up anew, and a sort of eagerness for the fray of which but a little while before he had been so weary.

Sardoni was the only one who troubled himself to wonder about the new baritone; he could not have told why it was that he had from the very first been so attracted by him, but the attraction only grew more powerful the more he saw of him, and his reckless nonchalance was fast melting away in the deep interest of this half-avowed friendship. He could have laughed at himself for being so absorbed in the study of a fellow-actor that his ordinary pleasures palled upon him; but there was no disputing the fact, and when Carlo was near he was always conscious of a sort of fascination which compelled him to throw off his cold indifference, which roused him into a pleasant warmth of wonder, and made him look and listen, and wait upon Donati's utterances as though they were most remarkable. And this, to tell the truth, they seldom were, for Carlo was not particularly intellectual, neither was he brilliant and witty; it was rather that he was what the Italians call '*Simpatia*,' and full of an undefined charm which made him as lovable as he was incomprehensible.

He came in soon after noon looking fagged and much inclined for a peaceful cigar.

'Have you been all this time at the theatre?' asked Sardoni.

'Yes, two mortal hours of altercation, the manager, the local conductor, Merlino, and Marioni, all in battle array.'

'With you as a go-between, I suppose, alternately used and abused?'

'Something like it,' he replied, laughing at a recollection of the dispute; 'the whole affair really rose out of a jealousy between Marioni and the local man. It seems to me that jealousy thrives like a weed in art life,—I shall soon be grudging you your superior parts, *amico mio*.'

'You're welcome to the parts,' said Sardoni, 'if you would make over a little of your superfluous applause to me. However, I intend to be proud of you, and not jealous, for did I not have my finger in the pie? And does not Italian opera owe me a deep debt of gratitude for having secured your services?'

At this moment Merlino entered abruptly. Though the difficulties had been smoothed away by Carlo's mediation the dispute had very much ruffled the manager's temper.

'Where is Anita?' he asked, fiercely.

'I have not seen her this morning,' said Carlo, foreseeing a bad time for his sister; 'by the bye, how about those letters?'

But Merlino with a grievance was like a dog with a bone; he would gnaw it, and worry it, and bite first on one side, then on the other, and when at last you thought it was safely buried he would exhume it and begin his operations all over again.

'Not yet, I'll be bound!' he exclaimed, wrathfully; 'it's abominable; she never stirs a finger to help me, and everything gone wrong as usual!'

He strode out of the room, and doubtless opened the vials of his wrath on Nita's head, for she appeared before long looking very much discomposed, but with a resentful light in her eyes which Carlo had learnt to understand too well.

All else would have been bearable enough to him if only he could have won Nita's love; but after the first day or two, when she had really been grateful to him for saving her from what in her better moods she fully recognised as a sin, she had never felt or pretended to feel for him any sort of affection. When alone with him, or when she wanted anything done, she would often be civil and even friendly, but when other people were present she seemed to take pleasure in snubbing him, and never allowed him to forget for a moment that he was her junior. The 'elder sisterly' style of treatment is never very

congenial to a man, and it was particularly irksome to Carlo, because he and Anita had so very little in common. It was, perhaps, this which made it so hard for him to win his way with her. They had none of the happy associations of childhood which form so strong a bond between most brothers and sisters ; they had grown up apart, and when, at rare intervals, Nita had returned from the convent, there had been little love lost between them. At nineteen she had left home for ever, and cast in her lot with Merlino, and now, after an interval of five years, the brother and sister were almost strangers to each other, and Carlo, often in despair, struggled to break down the wall of division which seemed to have risen between them. If he had been as indifferent to her as she was to him they might have drifted on without much discomfort, but he loved her, not only as the one specially left to him by his mother on her death-bed, not only with the family love which had first come to his aid in that time of numb grief, but with the divine love which had given him power to sacrifice himself for her sake.

It is often harder to understand the characters of those closely related to us than the characters of mere ordinary acquaintances, our very nearness hinders us from taking true and just views, and perhaps Carlo's love blinded him to some extent with regard to Nita. He credited her with virtues which she did not possess, and then was wounded when, in daily life, she was weighed in the balance and found wanting. He would say to himself : ' Is she not the child of my father and mother ? Then how is it possible that she should not at heart be really loving, really true ? ' But he did not realise, as a dispassionate spectator would have done, that, although Nita might originally have inherited many good gifts, her life and education had been quite enough to paralyse them.

In fact, her character was the natural outcome of a long course of tyranny. Tyranny in the convent had first taught her to be deceitful ; deceit had by degrees become ingrained in her nature, she had come to think of lying as a very venial sin, and it did not in the least trouble her to gain the ends she desired by crooked means. Was she not obliged to outwit the tyrants ? At her marriage she had escaped into what she had imagined would prove love and liberty, but in three months' time she had learnt that she had made a terrible mistake, and had sold herself into a slavery almost intolerable.

When a woman makes so terrible a discovery there are only two courses open to her, either she must sink or she must

swim, there is no idle drifting in such case. Nita never attempted to love her husband, she never tried to bridge over the differences between them; he tyrannised over her as was his nature, and she yielded in miserable, slavish despair, fearing him and hating him with her whole heart. So inevitably she sank, and there was not wanting—there never is wanting—a Comerio to help her. Sardoni considered her heartless and commonplace, and so she was, yet not so heartless as to be insensible to the charm of Comerio's devotion when contrasted with her husband's cruelty, and commonplace enough to fall with the greatest ease into the trap laid for her. Comerio's evil influence increased with a speed which alarmed her; she stood on the very brink of the precipice, but yet at the supreme moment some blind impulse had made her turn and rush back to her mother. Then she had thrown herself upon Carlo's mercy, and confessed all, and begged his help; he had replied by the gift of his life, and now, the danger for the moment tided over, poor Nita felt a sudden reaction, and wished with all her heart that she had acted differently. In her worst moments she hated Carlo for having ousted her lover, in her better moments she tried to goad herself into a sort of gratitude to him for what he had done; while often, in revenge for the humiliation of feeling that he knew her weakness, she delighted in trying his temper, and showing to the troupe that she had not the least intention of joining in the chorus of admiration which the outer world accorded to the new baritone.

Tyranny induces deceit, and it also engenders the desire to tyrannise. Nita, who had been made so miserable by her husband's overbearing nature, retaliated whenever she could on Gigi, or on her luckless dresser, or, strange to say, most frequently of all on Carlo. She was so certain of his love, so sure that he would never fail her, that she was not afraid to do this; and at present the consciousness that she could pain him was rather pleasant than otherwise, it gave her a feeling of power which flattered her pride.

'You seem to have worked up Merlino into a pleasant state,' she said, sarcastically, in reply to Carlo's greeting.

He disliked her way of speaking against her husband, and tried to turn the subject.

'There has been a good deal to worry him to-day, but all is straight now. We have been down at the theatre; it seems a better one than I should have expected.'

'All is straight, you should say, with the exception of the Impresario's temper,' said Nita, sharply. 'I wish you would



leave him alone and not interfere, you only make it a great deal worse for me.'

Nita's unreasonableness was at times enough to madden a man, and Carlo could not help sympathising a little with Merlino; he knew quite well that if he had not gone to the theatre her reproach would have been, 'You never try to put Merlino into a better temper, you never try to smooth matters for me.'

He was silent, and Nita, who had hoped to stir up a discussion, finding it impossible to quarrel alone, walked over to the window where Gigi was contentedly playing with his soldiers, and without a word of warning swept the whole of the miniature camp into its box.

'Go away! we can't have your toys all over the place!' she said, giving him a vindictive little push.

Gigi, whose tears were terribly near the surface, burst into a roar, and Carlo, who on principle never interfered between mother and child, had much ado to keep silence while the little fellow was ignominiously turned out of the room.

'It's all your fault,' said Nita, returning a little flushed from the contest; 'you make a great deal too much of the child, he must be taught his proper place.'

She sat down with her writing-case at the vacant table.

'I am going to the post-office directly,' said Carlo, by way of breaking the uncomfortable silence; 'shall you have any letters?'

'What affair is that of yours?' she asked, angrily. 'Is it not enough that my husband is spying on me all day long? If you think I am going to put up with you as spy you are mistaken. It was bad enough before you came!'

And with an impatient gesture she gathered her things together and left the room.

Sardoni, glancing up, saw the pained look on Carlo's face, and was so stung by it that he could no longer keep silence.

'By Jove!' he exclaimed; 'if Madame Merlino were not your sister I should give her a piece of my mind.'

He was curious to know what Carlo would say.

For a minute he was silent; then, stifling a sigh, he replied lightly, but not altogether without effort, 'You see those who cannot flog the horse flog the saddle. Merlino has vexed her, and she uses me as safety-valve.'

'And Merlino appears to do the same; you are between two fires.'

'But with a good comrade to cheer me when I am down in

the mouth. Some day, *amico mio*,—and as he spoke that bright, sudden, Italian smile seemed to make his whole face shine—‘some day I hope to have a chance of giving as well as taking from you.’

Sardoni felt choked; for some minutes he sat in deep thought, then looking up quickly, said, in his abrupt English way,—

‘I mean to take you at your word. To-morrow is Sunday. Is there any rehearsal?’

‘Marioni has arranged to take *Trovatore*, with the orchestra and chorus, but he’ll not need us.’

‘Good; then will you give me your company in the afternoon? I have a disagreeable piece of work to do, and should be glad of your help.’

Carlo seemed really pleased by the request, and, in truth, his interest in Sardoni was a capital thing for him, and helped to take him for the time being out of his own troubles.

## CHAPTER XX

### A RETURN

‘In vain Remorse and Fear and Hate  
Beat with bruised hands against a fate,  
Whose walls of iron only move  
And open to the touch of love.  
He only feels his burdens fall,  
Who, taught by suffering, pities all.’—WHITTIER.

‘How dismal the place looks!’ exclaimed Carlo, as, after service the next day, he walked with Sardoni through the quiet streets, with their shuttered shop-fronts and deserted roads, to the station. ‘A good thing, I daresay, to have the shops closed and to give the people a rest, but there is such a sleepy air about it all; they don’t seem to enjoy it.’

Sardoni laughed. ‘Sunday afternoon is always a sleepy time in England, I don’t know why; I assure you the most orthodox and energetic may be caught napping that one day of the week.’

‘They don’t seem to know how to enjoy,’ said Carlo, feeling quite oppressed, as foreigners always do by the extreme quiet. ‘Ah, here comes a band, that makes it a little more lively!’

*Giusto cielo!* What is this? A revolutionary club? See! they have "Blood and Fire" on their banner, that's rather too strong.'

'That, my dear Valentino, is the pet abomination of the true respectable Briton,—it is the Salvation Army, a band of religious workers.'

'They will at any rate rouse up the sleepers,' said Carlo, laughing. 'They make it seem a little less like a city stricken with the plague, I must say. It is cool to criticise your national customs after being here so short a time; but really your Sunday does seem to me rather too drowsy-respectable; it has little of the *Festa* about it.'

'That all depends on your definition of a *Festa*,' said Sardoni. 'The average Briton, who has been religiously brought up, goes to church morning and evening, eats a heavier dinner than usual in the middle of the day for the sake of sparing his servants, abuses the Salvation Army for disturbing the Sabbatical calm, and nods serenely through the afternoon over a volume of sermons.'

'They read sermons to themselves, do you mean, besides hearing two in the churches?' asked Carlo, with an air of such ingenuous astonishment that Sardoni burst into a laugh.

'Why, yes, to be sure; many of them wouldn't think it Sunday without,' he replied.

'Poor things! poor things!' said Carlo, with a pity which to the Englishman was highly comic.

'One man's meat is another man's poison, you see,' said Sardoni. 'But, look here, don't be too outspoken on these subjects, for, to tell you the truth, your sort of saintliness is not likely to be understood of a northern people. We like to take our pleasures sadly and our religion too.'

'We sang the *Jubilate* this morning,' said Carlo, reflectively; 'but certainly this doesn't look much like it.'

'For goodness' sake do hide your light under a bushel,' said Sardoni; 'for if you come out with all these broad notions in the place I'm going to take you to, it will be all over with me. I'm taking you as a sample of the troupe, and if you shock the prejudices of the natives you'll be worse than useless.'

'Where in the world are we going?' asked Carlo, looking perplexed.

By this time they had reached the station, and for reply Sardoni handed him his railway ticket. This conveyed to him nothing at all, and in silence he followed his friend to a smoking carriage, and, knowing intuitively that Sardoni did not care to

talk, lit a cigar and gave himself up to the enjoyment of the beautiful wooded country through which they were passing.

Sardoni watched him silently.

'After all, I doubt whether he'll make any impression on them,' he thought to himself. 'Now if he were a stiff, churchy-looking fellow, with a cross on his watch-chain and the ascetic type of face, there might be some good in his coming; or, on the other hand, if he were one of your priggish-looking, truly-pious young men, then I might gain a sort of reflected respectability. But there's no classifying Valentino, he won't fit any of the conventional notions. Imagine my father here at this moment; what would he see in him? Merely a very handsome Italian in a delightfully easy and comfortable attitude, travelling reprehensibly on a Sunday afternoon, idly enjoying the scenery and a cigar. And yet that fellow is a hero, if there ever was one, and a saint of the real sort, and no mistake. I could wish for this one afternoon to shake him into the goody-goody mould though; that, at any rate, has the merit of catching the eye of the respectable and virtuous, and getting a good deal more credit than it deserves. Now Valentino, looked at casually, might be anything. I believe if he thought more highly of himself he would get the credit he deserves, but, confound it, he never seems to think of himself at all.'

They got out at a small wayside station, and making their way up a steep hill found themselves on a wide, deserted-looking common, where here and there a solitary horse or cow grazed, and where the mingled heather and gorse, set like jewels in the smooth green of the turf, unloosed Carlo's tongue.

'How beautiful!' he exclaimed; 'I never saw anything like it before.'

Sardoni seemed pleased by his admiration.

'You see we have something besides chimney-pots in England,' he said, with a laugh. 'Look there.'

And he pointed to the rugged and rather wild-looking hills in the background. These, however, seemed to be much less to Carlo's taste than the smiling common with its near beauty and its glow of rich warm colour. He did not care much to look at them; but the narrow, winding lane into which they soon passed charmed him, and he seemed to find pleasure, which quite amused Sardoni, in the high hedges with their tangled growth of blackberry bushes, travellers' joy, and red hips and haws.

'A hedge like this is quite a novelty to me,' he said. 'We

have nothing of this sort. Do you know this part of the country well?’

‘I know every inch of the ground,’ said Sardoni. ‘Down there to the right is the village—look; you can just see the church tower through those trees.’

He leant over a field-gate and gazed down on the little country place with a softened look in his eyes, which Carlo was quick to note.

‘This is Sardoni’s old home,’ he thought to himself; but he only said, ‘It is a perfect little place, just like the English villages I have read of. I’m glad you brought me out here.’

‘We’ll cross this field,’ said Sardoni, not quite in his natural voice. ‘I don’t want to pass through the village, for some one is sure to recognise me. This is where I used to live, you know.’

‘And you are going home?’

Sardoni nodded. Just at that moment he could not have spoken a word to save his life.

Carlo, too, was silent, but his silence was perfect sympathy. It was the Englishman who first broke the pause.

‘It’s your doing, old fellow!’ he said, rather huskily. ‘I should never have come if it hadn’t been for you!’

He did not explain himself, and Carlo asked no questions, only looked glad and surprised; and quickly putting himself in Sardoni’s place, said,—

‘Let me wait for you here; you had better be alone.’

‘No,’ said Sardoni, with a forced laugh. ‘Alone, there is no knowing what I might do; I must have you, Valentino, to keep me up to it. I can assure you there’ll be none of the fatted-calf business. I’m nothing but a disgrace to them, and this is the hardest day’s work I’ve had for an age.’

Glad as Carlo was at his friend’s resolve to seek out his people, he was sorely perplexed as to the part he himself was to play. Naturally enough he felt that he would be very much *de trop* in a family reconciliation, nor could he understand how Sardoni could tolerate the presence of a comparative stranger at such a time. However, he was too unselfish to object on his own account, and wise enough to let Sardoni choose his own way of setting to work. They crossed the field, walked through a little copse, entered a sunny-looking garden and made their way towards the Vicarage, a pretty, grey old house with many gables and a moss-grown, red-tiled roof. Carlo could guess how his friend’s heart was beating, as with heightened colour he walked steadily up the well-kept drive; but Sardoni spoke not a word till they stood in the

porch and heard the bell echoing in the quiet house. Then he turned to his companion and said, with a touch of his ordinary jesting tone,—

‘The cat will be out of the bag at last—my name will no longer be a secret!’

As he spoke, steps were heard within, and through the half-glass door they could see a neat maidservant crossing the hall. Sardoni was relieved to see a strange face: it would have humiliated him dreadfully to be recognised by the parlour-maid.

‘Is Mr. Postlethwayte at home?’ he asked, in his strong, decided voice.

A look of perplexity came over the maid’s face.

‘No, sir; there’s no one of that name living here,’ she replied.

‘What! is he gone, then?’ exclaimed Sardoni, turning pale. ‘The vicar—who is vicar, now?’

‘Mr. Stanley is vicar now,’ said the maid. ‘Will you come in and see master, sir? He could, perhaps, tell you what you want to know. You see, sir, I’ve only been here in this situation a few days myself, so I don’t know the names hereabout.’

‘Thank you—no—I’ll not come in,’ said Sardoni; and he turned away and walked down the drive again with never a word.

‘*Amico mio!*’ said Carlo, when he ventured at last to break the silence; ‘what can I do for you? Shall I go and make inquiries in the village?’

They had by this time left the Vicarage garden, and were in the little copse; Sardoni threw himself down in the shade of an old elm-tree.

‘I wish you would, old fellow,’ he said, in a broken voice.

Carlo was just about to go when it suddenly occurred to him that he should have to master that extraordinary name which Sardoni had spoken at the door.

‘It’s stupid of me,’ he said, ‘but I couldn’t quite catch the surname. Say it over to me more slowly.’

‘Postlethwayte,’ said Sardoni, not turning his head.

‘Pothelswayte,’ repeated Carlo, with infinite pains.

Spite of his trouble Sardoni laughed.

‘You’ll not ask me to call you that?’ said Carlo, when, after many practisings and corrections, he had at length arrived at the right pronunciation.

‘No, it is too crack-jaw a name for an Italian; besides, I prefer to go *incog.* with the troupe. But I’ll not be Sardoni any more with you: call me Jack.’

'One thing,' said Carlo, as he prepared to go. 'How much am I to ask?'

'Ask when my father left, and why, and where he has gone; but give no reason for asking. Don't let them think you are my messenger.'

Carlo promised to do his best, and taking the path pointed out to him by Sardoni made his way through the quiet little churchyard and across a stile into the village street. For a moment he felt rather at a loss to know how to proceed, and half afraid lest the villagers might talk some unintelligible *patois*; however, he went boldly up to a group of big boys who were idling about and asked whether they could tell him where the sexton lived. Their dialect puzzled him not a little, but he managed to make out which house it was, and walking through the pretty strip of garden, with its hollyhocks and dahlias, knocked at the door. A little bent old man, with a weather-beaten face and a friendly but toothless smile, opened it.

'You keep the keys of the church, I am told. Am I permitted to see it?' asked Carlo.

'Yes, sir; certainly, sir,' mumbled the toothless old man. 'Fine day, sir! Step in a minute, will ye, sir?'

Carlo stepped in, and found himself in a snug little room which smelt strongly of apples. The old man took a couple of large keys from a nail, and then, with a great effort, tried to reach his hat from a peg on the wall.

'Allow me,' said Carlo, handing it to him in his pleasant, courteous way.

'Thank ye, sir,' said the old sexton, turning a kindly look on the handsome stranger. 'Time was when that there hook warn't a bit too high for me,—not a bit, sir; but, what with the rheumatiz and old age, why I be agoin' down as fast as my grandchilder be acomin' up.'

'You've been here a long time, I daresay?' said Carlo, feeling rather like a detective.

'Oh! ay, sir; that I have, sir, that I have! Why, I've been sexton here these forty years past, and born and bred in the place, too! Six vicars I've seen in this here parish. Our late Vicar's son, bless him, he used to say, "Why, Johnson, you're like the brook! Vicars may come and vicars go, but you go on for ever!" But lor! I never rightly understood which brook it was he meant.'

'Wasn't there some one named Postlethwayte here once?' asked Carlo, bringing out the name with laudable precision.

'Why, yes, sir. It was poor Master Jack as I was just telling on. Aw! he was a rare one for a jest, he was! The poor Vicar never held his head up again after he left.'

'Did the Vicar die?' asked Carlo.

'Aw no, sir, he didn't die; he be alive and well, bless him! But there was trouble with Master Jack—the old story, sir; the old story!—a pretty girl to put him off his balance; and then, when it all came out, he, just desperate-like at the blame he got at home, made away with some money that warn't his, and rushed off and was never heard of no more.'

Carlo could hardly have regulated his expression to the casual interest of a stranger had not his profession taught him to command his face and make it answer at all times to his will. He was glad that the sexton was silent for a minute while he fitted the key in the heavy oak-door of the church.

'That's a sad story,' he said at length. 'What became of the poor Vicar?'

'He couldn't stay here, sir; he felt the disgrace so bad he went away to foreign parts; and it's my belief, sir, that he had hopes of finding Master Jack, though other folks said different. However, I never heard as how they met, and the Vicar he be back in England now, and I wish we'd got him here again. Not but what Mr. Stanley is a good young man in his way, you understand, sir; but he ain't our old Vicar, and nothink won't make him.'

'Has he taken some new living, then?' asked Carlo.

'Ay, sir, he be just settled in since midsummer; the parish o' Cleevering in Mountshire—that's his new sitooation, and not a patch upon this parish, as far as money goes—at least, so folk say. Now, sir, just you step and see our monument. That's Sir Gerald Fitzgerald, as was killed in the Civil War; Naseby or Marston Moor I b'lieve it was,—at any rate, the last battle before King Charles was taken. Belike you know, sir, how it was called; I'm not much of a scholard myself.'

'Nor I,' said Carlo, not at all desiring to be put through an examination in English history, and feeling extremely shaky as to dates.

He stayed long enough to please the sexton, and duly admired the village church; then, having gladdened the old man's heart with a shilling, he bade him good-day, and rejoined Sardoni, whom he found still stretched at full length under the elm-tree.

He got up quickly as Carlo drew near, and looked anxiously into his face.



'Well?' he exclaimed, in the sharpened voice of fear and apprehension.

'It is all right,' said Carlo, reassuringly. 'Your father has got a new living. He is just settled down at Cleevering in Mountshire.'

'How did you find out? Did they suspect anything?'

'No; but they spoke of you. I learnt it from the old sexton.'

'What! dear old Johnson? Is he still alive? Did you really see him?'

'He seemed very fond of you all, especially of you, and he spoke so warmly of your father. But, Jack, you must forgive me, I couldn't help hearing it, for the old fellow would ramble on, and I couldn't shut him up without making him suspicious, I heard—well, what you wouldn't tell me that day at Naples.'

He looked up at him apologetically.

'Pon my soul!' exclaimed Sardoni, 'you're the oddest fellow I ever knew. You look as if it were you that was to blame, not me!'

'I was sorry to know it, since you didn't wish me to know.'

'All right, Val—all right!' said Sardoni, in a choked voice. 'I might have known it wouldn't turn you against me! As I told you yesterday, you would make excuses for the devil himself—and so would old Johnson! Tell me just what he said.'

They sat down again in the shade, and Carlo repeated the whole conversation, Sardoni listening with averted face, and nervously crushing in his fingers the fallen leaves which lay on the grass beside him.

'As to the money,' he said, when Carlo paused, 'I swear to you, Donati, I didn't know what I was doing! I was mad!—if not, is it likely that, to escape my father's blame, I should have done what the world would blame a thousand times more? Embezzlement is an unpardonable crime, but to ruin a girl is an offence very easily condoned by society.'

'That's true—to our shame be it spoken!' said Carlo, with a gleam of indignant light in his eyes.

'I was mad—desperate!' resumed Sardoni. 'It all came out at her death—and I—why I felt like a murderer! My father was not one to spare a fellow in such a case. I couldn't stand it; to stay at home was more than a fellow could bear; I was bound to get away from him. And then came a mad impulse to take this money which was within my reach, and break off with the old world altogether and rush to America.'

'And in America you met Merlino?'

'Yes. I got on much better than I deserved. But, somehow, a thing like that makes a fellow think, and when I saw the game Comerio was playing, and how helpless and friendless your sister was, I couldn't help feeling sorry for her, and angry to think that I was the last sort of man who could help her.'

'You did help—we owe everything to you!' said Carlo, warmly.

'Well, when your name was announced that day at Naples, I had just an impulse to see you and tell you the truth, and somehow,—there's a bit of the magician about you, Val,—you stung me up far worse than my father had ever done, and to some purpose. Hulloa! you are shivering with cold; let us walk on.'

He looked back sadly enough at the old home which his wrong-doing had desolated, then, turning away with a heavy sigh, left the copse and re-crossed the field. Carlo said little, but took his arm, and as they walked back to the station wondered in his own mind what would be the wisest thing for his friend to do.

'We are not very far from Mountshire, I suppose, here,' he said at length. 'Shall you go there or shall you write?'

'Neither,' said Sardoni. 'I can't go through a day like this again, Val.'

'But if, as the old sexton thought, your father had been trying to find you all these years? Surely you could at least write.'

'And send him a playbill?' said Sardoni, sarcastically. 'No, no; that idea of old Johnson's won't hold water. I know my father better than he does. He's one of the best men in the world, and also one of the hardest. I won't run the risk of reviving the old disgrace in a new parish; I will hold my peace, and be to everyone, except you, just Sardoni the tenor.'

Carlo was sorry that his friend had made this decision, but he knew that had he been in Sardoni's place arguments would only have irritated him. So he held his peace, and comforted himself with the reflection that in so small a country as England the chances were greatly in favour of a meeting between the father and son.

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## CHAPTER XXI

## WINTRY WEATHER

'Come through the gloom of clouded skies,  
The slow dim rain and fog athwart ;  
Through east winds keen with wrong and lies,  
Come and lift up my hopeless heart.  
Come through the sickness and the pain,  
The sore unrest that tosses still ;  
Through aching dark that hides the gain,  
Come and arouse my fainting will.'

*A Threefold Cord.*

THE autumn wore on, and the cold weather set in. Merlino's Company had become pretty well accustomed, however, to wintry weather during their American tour, and no one suffered much except Carlo, who, having never left Italy before, found the English climate fearfully trying. Unselfish as he was, he was by no means so devoid of common-sense as Captain Britton thought him, and, knowing how much depended on his health, he took all possible precautions. He was not one of those short-sighted and aggravating people who seem to take pleasure in prematurely wearing themselves out, and who give their friends constant trouble just because their zeal outruns their discretion. There was in his character a strong vein of that matter-of-fact good sense which is to be found in most Italians, though not in the popular English conception of them. Sardoni was quite surprised when, one day after 'Treasury,' he consulted him as to the best tailor in the place where they were staying, and then went off promptly and ordered a fur-lined coat which must have cost considerably more than a fortnight's salary, and which proved the envy of all the other men in the Company.

'You are the most inconsistent fellow I ever met,' said Sardoni, when the coat came home ; 'you go in for a luxurious thing like that, and yet seem to be willing to go without most things that other men care for.'

'It's not a bad thing in coats,' said Carlo, looking at the brown fur with satisfaction ; 'and this is the first time I've felt warm for a month. You see I really must get rid of this cough, or I shall soon have a voice like a fog-horn.'

'Well,' said Sardoni, with a laugh, 'I'm glad you're no ascetic, for they are bad to live with, as I know to my cost. There's nothing like it for driving a fellow the other way.'

But, spite of the fur coat, Carlo's health did not improve ; the constant travelling, the draughts on the stage, the necessity of turning out every night, ill or well, in rain or snow, and the constant strain of physical hard work and mental excitement, all told on him severely. Nor was it possible for a man of his temperament to go through all the suffering and grief of the past few months without paying for it. It was not only the change of physical climate which told upon him, it was the change of moral climate.

To have lived always with such tender, devoted love as had been his at home is in some ways a good preparation for after life, but it inevitably makes the plunge into the loveless outer world much harder—safer, perhaps, but more bitter. The world is the gainer, insomuch as it receives a loving, unsullied nature into its midst, but to the man himself the process is very painful ; he is, as it were, transported suddenly from the tropics to the arctic regions. Even Carlo's great success, which in itself was enjoyable enough, had many drawbacks, for it stirred up jealousy, or perhaps won him admiration and small attentions with which he would thankfully have dispensed. Already he had proved the truth of Enrico's remark—'The men will trouble you with their jealousy, because of your success, and the women with their love, because of your face.'

There were endless little annoyances of this sort, which in good health and spirits he could take lightly, but which began increasingly to prey upon his mind, while every day it seemed to him more difficult to put up with Merlino's rudeness, and with the petty insults and hateful innuendoes with which Gomez delighted to try his patience. Sardoni used to watch him curiously at such times ; he never got quite so far as not to show that he felt provoked, and this, no doubt, prompted Merlino and Gomez to persevere ; for to badger an obtuse man is no sport, but to worry a sensitive man and see how long he will stand it is interesting to some people. Even Sardoni owned to a kind of pleasurable feeling in watching these encounters ; more than once he surprised a look of vindictive anger on Carlo's face, and always he could see that his colour rose, and that the blood must be tingling in his veins, for he was hot-tempered, though he had his temper well in control. Curiously enough the only real outburst of passion into which he was betrayed was due to Sardoni himself, not to the cross-grained Impresario or the malicious Spaniard.

It arose in this way. Christmas was over, and Merlino's Company had wandered from big town to big town, sometimes

meeting with unusual success, sometimes performing to woe-fully empty houses, or at best to houses which had been 'filled with paper.' Carlo had by this time become well accustomed to the life; he was familiar with every face in that little moving army, with its curiously assorted nationalities and its several ranks and grades, its principals, its chorus-singers, male and female, its leading instrumentalists, who had to supplement the local orchestras, its stage carpenters, its baggage men, its dressers. Most of them were individually known to him, many of them were his friends, while some had been won over by Gomez into champions of the departed Comerio.

Towards the middle of January Merlino had arranged to take one of the London opera-houses, and give a series of twenty performances, a project bold to rashness at that time of year. The Company betook themselves to various dreary lodging-houses in the neighbourhood of the theatre, and Carlo, under very depressing circumstances, made his first acquaintance with London and his first appearance on a London stage.

It seemed as if everything conspired together against him at that time; the weather was trying in the extreme, there were heavy snow-storms, and then for days after the great piles of blackened snow would lie on either side of the streets. The dense, yellow fogs, and the utter absence of sun, made him so miserable that life seemed hardly worth living; while to add to the physical discomforts, his throat became so seriously affected by the climate that he often hardly knew how to get through his work. Merlino was in a state of nervous irritability natural enough and almost excusable to one who was playing so risky a game; Mlle. de Caisne, who travelled under Nita's chaperonage, had fallen hopelessly in love with the new baritone, and was a constant thorn in his side; while Nita herself was so tryingly foolish and unreasonable that it was all he could do not to lose patience with her. Things were in this state when suddenly a far worse trouble arose to threaten him. One morning, sorely chafed by some dispute which had arisen, he as usual took refuge in silence, and leaving Sardoni, to continue the conversation with Nita and Mlle. de Caisne, turned to the window and took up the outside of the *Times*, glancing with no special purpose down the columns in which concerts and matters connected with the musical world are advertised. He had taken up the paper casually enough, little thinking that instead of a distraction it would prove an additional care, when, suddenly, and with a shock indescribable, —a shock which for the time half paralysed him, he read the

words : 'Signor Comerio begs to announce his arrival in town. All communications with regard to concerts or other engagements to be addressed to Antico and Co.'

For some minutes he stood still, dimly hearing the voices in the room behind him,—dimly seeing the dreary street, with its grim, smutty houses and iron railings ; then, without a word, he folded the paper, left the room, and with a craving to get away alone out of the reach of all interruptions, made his way into St. James's Park.

Comerio had followed them ! Comerio was in England—in London at that very minute ! What could possibly have induced him to come to London at this time of year, save the one desire and intention of meeting Anita ? The news sent a sort of horrible flash of light across some of the dark hints which Gomez had lately dropped. A miserable feeling of utter hopelessness took possession of him ; he had tried and struggled, he had given up all for the sake of preventing this evil, he had borne shame, and pain, and wretchedness indescribable, and here were his plans defeated. How could he hope to overcome so wily a foe as Comerio ? How was it possible to save his sister when she refused to be saved ? He could not even feel that he had any influence with her, it seemed to him that as time went on she only treated him with a more contemptuous indifference, or at times even with open dislike. Had he given up all for her sake only to be hated by her in return ? Had he lost all that was dearest to him only to fail in this attempt ?

Those brief lines in the *Times* had fallen like a bomb-shell into his life.

He had wandered miserably round the dreary-looking park. The fog was not quite so dense as it had been on the previous day, he could see through a misty haze the chill, grey-looking water, and the ducks swimming about aimlessly, and here and there in the distance the outlines of great houses. Presently he heard the Westminster chimes, and he remembered how, long ago, Francesca had told him of the words which belonged to them—

' Lord, through this hour  
Be Thou our guide,  
So by Thy power  
No foot shall slide.'

But he was too hopeless to pray, and the next moment Big Ben warned him that he must hurry back for a rehearsal of *Un Ballo in Maschera*. He reached the theatre, feeling harassed

and ill, and made his way to the green-room, where he found Sardoni, looking more cheerful than he had done for some time past, and with a mischievous gleam about his eyes.

'You basely deserted me in the argument,' he exclaimed, as Carlo entered; 'but I'll have my revenge on you! You're the most careless fellow on earth, leaving diamonds straying about loose in a London lodging-house!'

Carlo, glancing down quickly, saw that Francesca's ring, which he always wore, was not on his hand.

'Where is it?' he said, hastily, feeling annoyed that he could have forgotten it even for a moment.

'Ah! that is the question,' said Sardoni, taking him by the shoulders in teasing fashion, and meaning to have a little fun out of him before he yielded the ring, which was on his own finger.

Unluckily the light at that moment happened to flash on the diamond, and Carlo, in a sudden paroxysm of anger, wrenched himself away from the teasing hold, and dashing at Sardoni with all his force, took him so completely by surprise that, before a bystander could have uttered a word of remonstrance, the tenor had measured his length on the floor, and the ring had been seized by its rightful owner.

Sardoni had gone over like a ninepin, being utterly unprepared for so furious an onslaught; he was angry and astonished.

'What the devil are you after?' he exclaimed, as he picked himself up.

'Jack, Jack,—I didn't mean it!' exclaimed Carlo, his wrath spent in that one lightning-like flash, and shame and regret overwhelming him as he partly realised what he had done, and saw the look of grave inquiry with which one of the officials belonging to the theatre regarded them as he entered the green-room.

Sardoni was silent till they were once more alone. He could not keep his anger in face of Carlo's shame and dismay.

'I didn't know there was anything particular about the ring. Gigi brought it down from your washhand-stand; I only meant to chaff you a little.'

'It was the ring which belonged to my betrothed,' said Carlo. 'Not that that is any excuse, indeed, I think it makes it rather worse.'

He was evidently so unhappy about it that Sardoni quite lost all feeling of offence.

'Well, you know, old fellow, I always wanted to poke up the devil in you and see what you'd do.'

Carlo turned away with a sigh.

'I can't think why I did it! I was beside myself. If I had done it to Gomez, now, it might have been easier to understand; but to you, Jack, you whom I'm really fond of! I can never forgive myself.'

He was very quiet now, and sad and ashamed; in all his life he had never been guilty of such an unreasoning fit of anger.

'Never mind, Val,' said the Englishman, almost as much surprised by the vehement regret as by the attack itself. 'I declare I like you the better for it, I do indeed. Why, to hear you talk one might suppose you had meant to murder me!'

'I meant nothing, that's the horrible part of it to me,' said Carlo. 'I wanted the ring and to be free from your teasing. There wasn't a moment to think—it was all over in a flash. How am I to tell that I mayn't murder some fellow one of these days by a like impulse?'

'My dear boy!' Sardoni laughed till he was almost convulsed, 'you who wouldn't hurt a fly!'

'Well, you laugh,' said Carlo; 'and it's good of you to take it lightly; but I can't see that there's a pin to choose between me and the man who murders in sudden anger. Anyhow, I know I can never be hard on such a murderer again.'

'That's like the story of the fellow who saw a man going to the gallows, and exclaimed, "There but for the grace of God goes——" I forget the old buffer's name. However, Val, I don't think you need be afraid, for you have plenty of that sort of thing and little enough of the devil's help.'

'That's what I can't understand about it,' said Carlo, in the most outspoken way. He hardly ever spoke of religion, but when he did speak it was with the direct simplicity and naturalness hardly ever to be met with in England save in children. 'That's what puzzles me. How can I say the *Veni Creator* one hour and know it is true, and the next turn upon my friend like that? My blood was made hot just by that trifle.'

At that moment the call-boy appeared to summon them, but in the many and wearisome delays, and repetitions, and scraps of rest, Carlo apparently had time to think out his problem; for as he and Sardoni walked home together he said, just as if no rehearsal had intervened,—



'I see how it was, Jack. I was horribly anxious, and had lost faith; then quickly into that vacant space steps the devil, and *presto!* I am made to knock down my best friend.'

Evidently the whole affair was so graphically before his own mind that Sardoni suppressed his inclination to laugh.

'You are an old-fashioned fellow, Val,' he said; 'not at all up to the modern lights, as I told you once before. A fellow that does believe in the devil and doesn't believe in divorce! My dear boy, you're an anachronism! But what made you so horribly anxious? Anything gone wrong?'

'No, of course it's all right; but at first it took my breath away, and I thought all was lost. Comerio is in London.'

Sardoni gave a low whistle of surprise and dismay.

'Are you sure it is true? Who told you?'

'No one. I saw it in the *Times* this morning.'

'What! while I was finishing the argument? You had plenty of self-control, then, for you betrayed nothing at all.'

'*Il Diavolo* had not then arrived on the scene; he joined me in St. James's Park,' said Carlo, with the utmost gravity.

'I hope he is not with us in the Pall Mall,' said Sardoni, mischievously. 'It makes me feel quite uncanny to hear you talk. Let us hope he has left you.'

'Why, certainly,' said Carlo, with perfect good humour, and unconsciously borrowing one of Gigi's Americanisms. 'I couldn't do with him at all on the stage. How could I have rehearsed Renato to any purpose if I had been worrying over Comerio's arrival all the time?'

'Oh!' said Sardoni, reflectively; 'so you think that his province is to make people worry.'

'To seize on everyone's vulnerable point,' said Carlo. 'I see now that to worry oneself and be over anxious about others is a sin.'

'One that most people consider a virtue and love to parade,' said Sardoni, with some recollection of his old home-life in his mind.

'Myself I never thought of it before, but it must be so,' said Carlo. 'One needs a thing like this every now and then to make one think. I hope you'll forgive me, Jack, for having been in such a fury with you.'

Sardoni laughed away his apologies, declaring again that he liked him the better for it; but it was not the passion which made him feel this, it was the contrast between the sudden outburst and Carlo's usual life; it was the thought, 'this fellow is no weakly, amiable character, he is strong enough to keep

under this hot southern nature. After all there's hope for me yet, if he, with such fire in his veins, has managed to turn out what he is.' He was far from troubling himself to go into the matter in such detail, but this was the real reason that he was so strongly drawn to his friend after their quarrel.

Sardoni was not a little curious to know more about Carlo's love affairs, but he could not make up his mind to speak to him about the matter; instead, he threw out a casual remark that afternoon, when it happened that he and Anita were practising a duet in the drawing-room which they had to sing at night.

'Mlle. de Caisne is doing her best to captivate your brother, don't you think?' he said, by way of leading up to the subject.

'Yes, the little goose,' said Nita; 'it makes me quite cross to watch her.'

'Our Valentino doesn't exactly enjoy it either, I fancy,' said Sardoni. 'I understand from him that he was to have been married at one time.'

'Yes, he was betrothed to Miss Britton, an English girl who lived near us. It was broken off when he went on the stage; in some ways it is rather a pity, for she was well off, and he'll not find such a pretty girl again in a hurry. But, after all, as I told him only the other day, these marriages with foreigners seldom turn out really well.'

'What did he say to that?' asked Sardoni, marvelling at the indifferent way in which she spoke of the sacrifice which she must have known had been made for her sake.

'Oh, he said nothing at all! only blushed up like a girl, and looked as he always does when I say what he doesn't like.'

While she was speaking the door was thrown open, and the servant announced 'Signor Comerio.' Sardoni, charmed to think how Comerio would hate him for being in the way, greeted him in the friendliest manner, and determined to stay and be hated to the bitter end: he could see from Anita's manner that she was not wholly unprepared for Comerio's sudden appearance.

'But I interrupt a *tête-à-tête*,' said Comerio, in his soft, flattering voice. 'What did I hear from Madame Merlino's lips? "When I say what he doesn't like!" Does our *prima donna* ever say anything distasteful to mankind?'

Nita laughed.

'We were talking of my brother,' she said, taking her revenge on Sardoni for not at once going away by saying what

she knew would vex him. 'I was trying to persuade him the other day that it was just as well his engagement with Miss Britton was broken off, and naturally he didn't like it.'

Sardoni bit his lip. He would have given much to have refrained from introducing the subject, and he thought Madame Merlino showed very bad taste in speaking of it before Comerio, while, to make matters worse, Carlo happened just then to come into the room.

Now, Comerio had his back to the door, but he could see all that was passing in the mirror, and he was quick to seize the opportunity of wounding his foe.

'Miss Britton, the beautiful English girl?' he exclaimed. 'Yes, yes; I saw her only the other day. She's quite the rage just now at Naples.'

Sardoni glanced from the cold, clever, cruel face of Comerio to the face of his friend. The words evidently stung Carlo. He paused for a minute with his hand on the door, but quickly regaining a composure that under the circumstances was masterly, he came forward, greeted Comerio in his ceremonious Italian way, and contrived to keep the conversation pretty much in his own hands throughout the call. Sardoni, in his careless, easy fashion, helped him not a little by making a running fire of jests and bad puns, while all the time he was studying that strange trio who beneath his eyes were acting so grave a drama—Nita, nervous and excited; Comerio, with his contemptible hatred and contemptible love showing occasionally through the thin veneer of ordinary politeness; and the Knight-Errant himself, with his manly, alert-looking face, and his enviable way of saying the right thing at the right minute.

Certainly, Comerio gained little that afternoon; but his pursuit had unsettled Anita, and though Carlo could not make out that she saw him except every now and then in the green-room when many others were present, yet he knew that there had never been a time when his hopes had so nearly been defeated.

It was some relief to get away from London, for in the provinces he felt that the sword of Damocles was not so immediately above them. In the meantime, however, his cough grew worse, and he began to look very delicate—at least, so thought Gomez and Sardoni, the only two people who really watched him.

It was one night at Birmingham that Gomez managed to give his enemy the sharpest stab he had yet delivered. For some days Carlo had been in wretched voice, and on this

particular evening he was conscious that his performance had been worse than usual. He came into the green-room feeling worn-out and dispirited. Gomez, Sardoni, Nita, and two or three others were grouped about the fire. Nita, in her elder-sisterly fashion, began to upbraid him.

'You sang execrably, Carlo!' she said, thrusting her little daintily-shod foot nearer the blaze, and looking far from pleasant as she lifted her bright, cold eyes to his. 'You put me out altogether in that last scene. It's intolerable!'

'I am sorry I put you out,' he said, with the pained look which he seldom managed now to repress when Nita attacked him.

'Don't discourage him; that's not fair on a beginner!' said Gomez. 'See, Donati, there's a critique on your "Rigoletto" in the evening paper.'

And he handed it to him with a sarcastic little bow.

'Too bad! too bad!' exclaimed some of the others; but they laughed nevertheless, for the new baritone had hitherto received nothing but praise, and they thought a change of diet would be good for him, while to them it was undoubtedly sweet.

Carlo took the paper without a word, and read the notice through, knowing quite well that Gomez would not have drawn his attention to it had the criticism been favourable. It was not his way to pretend to be indifferent to the Press; he did care for the praise or blame or suggestion, and never tried to disguise his feeling, though nothing would have induced him to win favourable notices by any efforts of his own. Criticism had, however, much to do with his future, and on his success hinged all his plans for Nita's protection; so that he fully recognised the fact so well put by Macready, that, 'We cannot "read our history in a nation's eyes," but we can in the daily papers.'

'It is quite true,' he said, throwing down the journal with a stifled sigh. 'I acted badly last night and sang worse. They have every reason to pitch into me.'

'The fact is, you're not fit to sing at all,' said Gomez, affecting a tone of friendly advice. 'You are ill, and need a long rest.'

'No, no,' said Carlo, quickly; 'it's nothing but this awful climate. I shall be all right when it gets warmer. I mean to go in for an Ammoniaphone, and see if manufactured Italian air won't work wonders.'

'Well,' said Gomez, 'Comerio prophesies that he shall go to

America with us next September, and I believe his prophecy will come true.'

Carlo glanced at his sister, and read in her face excitement—even, he fancied, hope. He was deeply wounded, as Sardoni, who had been idly looking on without taking any part in the talk, could see.

'Ladies and gentlemen for the last act!' announced the call-boy; and the little group round the fire dispersed.

Carlo, whose part in the opera was over, left the green-room with Anita, walking with her to the wings.

'I hope I shall be able to stay with you,' he said, in a low voice, feeling that he must win from her some word which would contradict the look he feared he had seen in her face.

'Do you?' she said, coldly. 'It is satisfactory to see how you like the life. I should have thought, now your voice has gone off so much, you would have been glad enough if Merlino chooses to end your engagement in the summer. For my part, I wish he would!'

The tone of bitter dislike in which she spoke was more than he could bear. He turned away, and shut himself into his dressing-room, where presently Sardoni found him, with his arms on the mantelpiece, his face hidden, and his whole frame shaken with sobs.

'Why, Val!' exclaimed his friend, 'has that brute of a Spaniard vexed you so much?'

'Go, go!' he exclaimed vehemently in Italian. 'You can't understand!'

'I'll be hanged if I go!' said Sardoni, laying a hand on his shoulder. 'Bless your innocence! do you think no Englishman has ever shed tears? I know what it was; it was not Gomez—it was something Madame Merlino said to you just now.'

Carlo raised his head, thrust both hands through his hair, and, still keeping his face hidden, said in a voice which struggled in vain to steady itself,—

'She hopes it will be as he said. She wishes me to go. It is all of no use; I can do nothing for her—nothing!'

'Now, look here!' said Sardoni; 'it's not a bit of good for you to try to think rationally to-night. You are bothered by that critique, and by your bad reception just now, and by that brute Gomez—and by a hundred other things, likely enough. You just shelve it all till to-morrow; and come and have some oysters with me, and then go to bed like a Christian.'

Carlo made an effort to recover himself, and before long was

walking home arm in arm with Sardoni, his hat pulled over his eyes.

'The fact is, old fellow, you're a long bit too sensitive for knocking about with men of the calibre of Gomez and Comerio,' said Sardoni. 'However, you would never act as you do if you weren't sensitive, so it cuts both ways.'

'For oneself it pays better to call it being thin-skinned,' said Carlo, regaining his matter-of-fact tone. 'Once humour your emotional side, and you are lost. I don't know how I came to break down just now. This east wind plays the very devil with one. When do you think it will change?'

'Oh, very soon now,' said Sardoni, drawing on his imagination, for they were not half through March.

'You don't think it is true what Gomez said—you don't think I am really losing my voice?' said Carlo, longing for Sardoni to contradict the conviction that was becoming a daily torment to his mind.

'Not a bit of it!' said the Englishman, cheerfully; 'nothing but the climate. Keep up your heart, old boy! you'll soon be used to it, and then you can snap your fingers at Comerio and the rest of them. You may be quite sure that Merlino won't part with you in a hurry. Why, you are his ace of trumps!'

And all the time Sardoni knew that his friend was on the verge of a breakdown; and Carlo himself suspected as much, yet found a sort of comfort in having his fears reasoned away.

We have all of us been glad at one time or another to win through a dreary bit of life by the help of illusions, even though we partly guessed they were illusions all the time.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### A RESCUER

'Such was the life Thou livedst, self-abjuring,  
Thine own pains never easing,  
Our burdens bearing, our just doom enduring,  
A life without self-pleasing.'—FABER.

MR. GEORGE BRITTON was a man who seldom ate the bread of idleness, and since his hurried visit to Naples in the early summer his holidays had been few and far between. A cruise of a few days in the *Pilgrim* before the close of the yachting

season had been all he could snatch from his busy life, for he was one of those men who are always going out of their way to help other people, and this cannot be done without an expenditure of time and labour which is often scarcely realised. He was so kind-hearted, so genial a man, that he numbered his friends by hundreds; and his life brought him into contact with such hosts of people that it was often all he could do to remember the names of those he had helped, to say nothing of their faces. He had not, however, altogether forgotten Carlo Donati; more than once he had thought of his pretty niece's ill-fated love-story, but having promised to say nothing about it, even to Miss Claremont, he had thought it best to mention Carlo's name as little as possible.

'Yes, I saw him,' had been his cautious reply to Clare's questions; 'but the Signora Donati is dead, and I fancy there will not be so much communication between the two houses now. I myself liked the fellow very much, but he has some political ideas which annoy my brother.'

That was all that had passed with regard to Carlo during the nine months which had since gone by. Clare felt a little sorry and disappointed as she realised how hard it is not to grow apart from old friends whom there is no chance of meeting; but she remembered that it was the way of the world, and that in her wandering life she must try to be content with touching people closely for the time, and then passing off the scene to make room for fresh comers. It crossed her mind once or twice to write to Carlo and send him her sympathy in his trouble about his mother; but such letters are hard to write, and she was so busy that somehow the time never came. She contented herself with inquiring after him in her next letter to Francesca; but Francesca was a shockingly bad correspondent, and when, in two months' time, she replied to the letter she made no mention at all of Carlo.

Mr. Britton's business often took him from Ashborough, where his own works were carried on, to a place in the neighbouring county—Mardentown; and one cold, dreary, March afternoon he was pacing the platform of the Mardentown station, waiting for the train that was to take him home. He was not alone. One of his many acquaintances had walked to the station to see him off, and was pouring out some of his own troubles into the shipbuilder's sympathetic ears, when he became conscious that his friend was not listening quite so attentively as usual, and following the direction of his eyes, exclaimed,—

'Oh! you are noticing those Italians. I thought they all went off yesterday: there was quite a crowd of them last night. It's an Operatic Company; that's the Impresario, that sullen-faced man with a black beard; and that's his wife, the *prima donna* of the party. I suppose the rank and file went off yesterday and left a few of the swells behind.'

'Curious,' said Mr. Britton, glancing again at the little group; 'that fellow is like a man I met at Naples last year! But, after all, foreigners always look more or less alike. He's a handsome fellow; isn't he?'

'The young one, do you mean? Yes, but too small; that's always the way with Italians. He looks bigger on the stage, though. I saw him the other night in *Marta*. What on earth was he called—Sardoni? No; that was the tenor. I forget. One mixes up these outlandish names so. Look, they are sending him to the bookstall to get the local papers; no doubt they want to read the criticisms on their singing.'

The talk turned once more upon other matters, and the two friends paced up the platform; then, warned by the big bell that the train was coming into the station, retraced their steps.

'Good Heavens!' exclaimed Mr. Britton, clutching his friend's arm. 'Look! A child on the line!'

He rushed down the platform, while at the same instant warning cries, shouts, and a heartrending shriek in a woman's voice, filled the air. It was all over in a few seconds, and yet there seemed time to take in all the details—the horror of the spectators, the utter helplessness of the child himself, who stood terrified and bewildered, hearing the shouts, seeing the train approaching, and yet too completely paralysed by fear to move, literally frightened out of his wits. Mr. Britton dashed on and had almost reached the spot when a slight, lithe figure darted across the platform in front of him; it was a wonder that they did not knock each other over, but the Italian just swerved to the left in time, leapt down on to the railroad, and ran like the wind to the rescue of the child. There was a moment of intense pain to all the spectators; people held their breath; would the child be saved, or would he and his rescuer be cut down together? The chances seemed about even: not a little depended on the man's strength, and the child might, no doubt, help or hinder his own rescue. The train was slackening speed, yet it seemed to advance with a rapidity that was frightful to watch. It was almost upon the child; the women hid their faces, the men strained their eyes to see



what would happen, while the rescuer gave a cry, at the sound of which the child turned, ran a step or two with uplifted hands, and was caught up in the strong arms of the man who had saved it from death. The next instant they were in the six-foot way, and the train passed on and hid them from view.

Mr. Britton drew a deep breath, and, now that the horror of the moment was over, found time to wonder at the cowardice of the spectators. There were several men on the platform, some of them far nearer than he had been at the time the alarm had been given; but no one had rushed instantly to the rescue except himself and the young Italian who had intercepted him.

'Of course,' he overheard one man remark to another, 'I made sure the people who belonged to him would save the poor little beggar. They say he's the child of Merlino, but if so, Merlino did nothing but shout and tear his hair. Look here! there'll just be time for a brandy-and-soda; I declare it's given me quite a turn.'

The speakers ran at full speed to the refreshment-room, and Mr. Britton, with indignation in his heart, turned to see whether the rescuer was in sight again. He was at that moment appearing at the far end of the platform, the child still in his arms. Mr. Britton joined in the eager little crowd which speedily surrounded him; but everyone was talking and asking questions, so he held his peace, only looking and listening and feeling strongly drawn to the young Italian, who seemed not to consider himself at all in the light of a hero, or to be troubled by the fear that the spectators might do so. An Englishman's first impulse would have been to escape from the eyes of the crowd; the Italian seemed not to consider at all what the onlookers might think of him; he was a little flushed and excited and much taken up with the child, who clung to him and refused to be given to his father.

'The dear little fellow,' said Merlino, kissing his son, with tears in his eyes. 'He is not hurt? You are sure he is not hurt?'

'Not a bit, only frightened. How in the world did he get down there?'

'He owes his life to you, sir,' said the station-master; 'I never saw a closer shave!'

'It seemed almost upon us,' said Carlo, 'relentless as Juggernaut.'

But, though he did not under-estimate the danger, it did

not appear to make him feel the need of a brandy-and-soda. He turned in the most practical and matter-of-fact way to choose a carriage.

'You get in, Nita,' he said, opening the door, 'and I'll give you Gigi on your lap.'

Mr. Britton, puzzled at the comparative indifference of the mother, took possession of a corner-seat in the same carriage, and felt relieved to see that as she took the child she bent down and covered his face with kisses. In truth, poor Nita in that moment of horror had for the first time realised what the loss of her child would be to her; the agony of seeing him in danger, without being able to stir a finger to save him, had touched into life the motherly love which till now had lain dormant in her heart. But the shock had almost stunned her for the time, and it was not till she held Gigi in her arms that any sign of feeling escaped her. Carlo's face lighted up as he saw how closely she held the little fellow, and both he and Merlino were so much taken up with the child, that it was not till just the last minute that they thought of the luggage.

'Did you see it in, Gomez?' asked Carlo, turning to the Spaniard, who had ensconced himself comfortably in the corner opposite Mr. Britton, and beside Mlle. de Caisne.

'I? No, I imagined you had given directions,' replied Gomez, with the most irritating air of calm dignity.

Carlo sprang up and put his head out of the window.

'It is gone,' he said, 'it must be all right.'

'Ah, but my bag!' exclaimed Nita. 'You really might think of things for me! I must have left it on one of the benches.'

The train was on the point of starting, Carlo flung open the door and rushed in search of the lost property, while Merlino, fuming with impatience and anxiety, hurried across the carriage to look from the window.

'*Santo diavolo!* we are moving!' he exclaimed. 'What induced you to be so careless, Nita! Valentino will be left behind—he'll be too late for the opera. There! I told you so,' as the train steamed on relentlessly, and a porter closed the door with an authoritative bang, regarding neither the nerves nor the anxieties of the travellers.

'There's not a creature who can take his part to-night, you know there's not, and Marioni won't have rehearsed anything else,' stormed Merlino, swearing at his wife, and wholly disregarding the presence of a stranger. The babel that ensued was deafening, Gigi adding not a little to the confusion by

bursting into tears, and crying as only children of that age can cry. Mr. Britton began to wish that he had chosen another carriage, yet was obliged to own that these people interested him, and that there was something rather amusing in this glimpse of life behind the scenes. He got out his train-book to see whether there was any other train which would bring the missing singer away from Mardentown in time for the opera, and wondered whether these people were going to Ashborough, or to its near neighbour and rival, Queenbury.

Just at this minute, however, the train stopped at a suburban station, and, to the relief and astonishment of all, Carlo suddenly appeared at the door.

'Where on earth did you come from?' exclaimed Merlino.

'The guard's van,' said Carlo, taking the vacant place beside Mr. Britton, and evidently perceiving that the atmosphere was disturbed. 'I am afraid I gave you all a fright, but there was no chance of getting back to you, only just time to make a dash at the last carriage. I seem fated to run races with the train to-day.'

There is nothing more strangely trying than the sudden reaction after great anxiety. Merlino, whose temper was always irritable, was now in the worst possible humour; the very perception that he owed a deep debt of gratitude to his brother-in-law chafed him into greater rudeness and harshness. As for Carlo, when he had put the bag up in the netting, he resigned himself to the inevitable, and bore the storm for the most part in silence, interposing a word or two when he thought it would be any use, but knowing too well that Merlino in this sort of humour must be allowed to have his fling, and that any sort of argument would only make matters worse.

At the first opportunity he took Gigi on his knee, and drawing a little further from Merlino, and nearer to Mr. Britton, began to do what he could to check the loud crying, which was irritating both the father and mother, and which had resisted all Nita's coaxing and Merlino's threatening.

'See, Gigi, you must be quiet,' he said, lowering his voice a little.

'I thought you were lost,' sobbed the child; 'I was so frightened,—and—and I've lost my poor, dear, little soldier!'

When he had recounted this catalogue of woes his tears rained down faster than ever.

'You shall have another. Where did you lose it?'

'It dropped down where the train goes, and I jumped down

to look for it, but I couldn't see it nowhere, and then they shouted, and the train came by.'

'Well,' said Carlo, holding the child closer, 'you must never get off the platform again at a station; and as to the little soldier, why we will get a new one to-morrow at Ashborough. See, dry your eyes, and be a man, and then we will hear about Lionbruno if you like.'

'I don't want Lionbruno,' said Gigi.

'Well, then, the "Fair Fiorita," or the "Fairy Orlanda," or shall it be about Buchettino and the Ogre?'

'I think I'd like about Giucca, and, "eat, my clothes, eat!"' said Gigi.

'Very well,' said Carlo. And in English, since that was the language which Gigi liked best to talk, but with all the graphic imagery of an Italian, he told the story of Giucca's two visits to the farm; of how in his poor clothes they drove him away with scorn, but when he came in velvet vest and gay raiment they invited him to dinner; and how in irony he had put the food in his hat and in his pockets, saying, 'Eat, my clothes, eat! for you were invited,'—taking care to make a good dinner for himself into the bargain.

'Another,' said Gigi, when this story was ended. By this time Merlino and his wife had settled down into their respective corners, Merlino and Gomez had taken up their papers, Nita and Mlle. de Caisne appeared to sleep; of the stranger Carlo had taken scarcely any notice, nor would it have embarrassed him, probably, had he known that Mr. Britton was listening to the stories quite as attentively as was Gigi.

'What shall it be? "The Shepherd who made the King's daughter laugh"?' asked Carlo.

'No,' said Gigi, 'I'm so tired; I'd like to have about *Il Cristo*.'

'Which story do you want?'

'Something new,' said the child. 'I'm so tired,—so tired.'

'Well, once upon a time,' began Carlo, who had no feeling at all as to the mixture of sacred and secular,—'once upon a time, *Il Cristo* was very tired, he had been going about from town to town you must know, and in the towns he never had a minute's quiet, for, of course, the people wanted to see him, and all day long they were coming and going, and talking and asking his help, so that he had no rest, and not even time to eat.'

'That's like you, *zio caro*,' put in Gigi.

'And just at this time he was sad as well as tired; for you

must know that in that country was a bad king, and this one had taken one of *Il Cristo's* friends, with whom he used to play when he was a little boy, and had shut him up in a great, gloomy old castle by the side of a lake, and when he had kept him in prison a long time he sent his soldiers one evening and ordered the good man's head to be cut off. When *Il Cristo* heard that his friend was dead you can fancy how sad he was, and how he wanted to be alone for a little while out of the hurry and the rush of the town: and he knew that his followers, too, were tired, for they had been travelling about, and had had hard work to do.'

'Were they in his troupe, do you mean?' asked Gigi.

'Not exactly; but they travelled about with him; they were the men who tried hardest to do what he said. And just before this they had been travelling by themselves, which was much harder than travelling with *Il Cristo*.'

'Did they travel on stuffy cars like this?'

'No, there were no cars then; most likely they walked, and it was hot like a furnace, and the sun beat down on their heads and the dust came in great clouds, and when they got back to the town they were tired out. Then *Il Cristo* saw how it was with them, and he said, "Come away from the town and the hurry and bustle, come right away into the country and have a rest."

'Then they were glad, and he took them in a ship to a place where he thought they would be quiet—a nice country place.'

'I guess it was like Salem,' said Gigi, *sotto voce*.

'But when they got there, why, what do you think? the people from the towns had got there before them by a quicker way, and there was a crowd waiting for them which you should have seen!'

'Then the troupe didn't get a holiday after all?'

'Yes, but they did. *Il Cristo* took the work himself, and they rested, and just heard him talk.'

'I guess they liked that better than walking in the sun,' said Gigi, thoughtfully. 'Why, do you know, *zio*, I feel kind o' rested listening to you here in this car; and they had the country and *Il Cristo* too. Do you think he would have been like that to tired men in our profession?'

'Why, yes, of course,' said Carlo, smiling a little at the way the child identified himself with the company.

'I wish he'd take us to a country place. You look kind o' tired. I think he might.'

'So he will when we really need it.'

'Did *Il Cristo* travel about always like we do? And do you think he got nasty hotels and lumpy beds?'

'Often no bed at all; he said so once, not grumbling you know, he never grumbled.'

'We do sometimes, don't we, when they're real bad?'

'Yes; but he made the best of things, and thought of other people before himself; so now, you see, when he was tired and sad he first took care of the followers, and gave them a rest, and then gave the great crowd of people a real good time, and let them come and talk to him, and cured the ones who were sick, and taught them how to be good, and before he sent them home again gave them plenty to eat.'

'I guess I'm rather hungry just now,' said Gigi. 'May I have a brown dog?'

A 'brown dog' proved to be a substantial-looking biscuit, and by the time this had been discussed Gigi had grown sleepy. Gomez at the next station changed to a smoking carriage, and Carlo, taking possession of his empty corner, made the child comfortable, and suggested a *siesta*, while Mr. Britton was glad to have an opportunity of studying his features at leisure, and trying to compare them with his recollections of Carlo Donati when he had last met him. He saw that there was a likeness, yet at the same time a great difference, and this Signor Valentino, as he fancied his name to be, had a look of strength about him which Donati had lacked. It was hard to describe the great fascination of the face, the curves of the smooth cheeks and chin were beautiful, the dark moustache so slight that it did not hide the finely chiselled lips; the forehead was specially developed just above the eyebrows, the ear small and set high up in the shapely head, while the rough, dark hair, the high cheek bones, and the deep, brown eyes would alone have stamped him as an Italian. He had pulled his red Phrygian train-cap to a comfortable angle, and had leant back in the corner, with the child still in his arms. Mr. Britton could have wished that he had not chosen to go to sleep, for he would have liked to talk with him, and, perhaps, to say a word or two about his prompt rescue of the little boy, but he was evidently tired, and though from time to time he raised his eyelids and glanced out of the window at the country through which they were passing, he never seemed to notice his English travelling companion, or to have the slightest wish to talk. In fact, Carlo had for the time being forgotten his present surroundings altogether, Gigi's words had returned to him: 'I wish he'd

take us to a country place.' Now there were times when his longing for Italy was the keenest of pains, but there were also times when the mere recollection of his old home made him very happy. It was thus this afternoon; half asleep, half awake, his mind went back to the old familiar scenes; he saw the blue bay of Baja, and the pearly grey mountains of Ischia, and the smiling *campagna*, and the near hills, with their outlines broken here and there by umbrella pines. Then he wandered down the long, shady walks of the Casa Bella garden, and once more Francesca was with him, and just then the recollection of her was enough to make him happy; there were times when he hardly dared to think of her at all; there were times when memory was anguish, but there were also times when he could smile to himself with the happiness of the mere thought that Francesca lived and that he loved her.

'Is this Ashborough?' asked Nita from the other end of the carriage.

He was startled back into the present by a voice which seemed to him to be Captain Britton's.

'Yes; this is Ashborough, madam.'

Could this traveller be the Captain's brother—the 'Uncle George'—whose arrival at Naples he so well remembered?

He felt uncertain. It might be only that his half-dreamy recollections of Casa Bella had made him fancy some familiar tone in this Englishman's voice. It was hardly likely that Mr. Britton should happen to get into the same carriage with them. Besides, he had never connected him with the neighbourhood of Ashborough; he fancied Merlebank was in another county. And even if this should indeed be Francesca's uncle, would it be very desirable to introduce himself under the circumstances?

While he wondered what to do, the train had steamed into the station, and his doubts were solved and his opportunity lost at the same moment. Some one on the platform recognised the grey-bearded Englishman, and threw open the carriage-door.

'Ha, Britton! are you here? I'm just off to Queenbury, and will take your vacant place.'

'How are you?' said the Englishman, with a hearty grip of the hand. 'Any of my people here, do you know?'

'The carriage wasn't up just now; hindered, very likely; the town is in an awful confusion—the races on Monday, you know.'

Carlo heard no more. He had to carry Gigi to the nearest fly, and the flies seemed scarce and mostly engaged. When at length he had secured one, and made over Gigi to his mother, he had to rush off and see to the luggage, and there was no time to think any more of his own plans.

In the meantime, however, Mr. Britton had not lost sight of him. He felt strangely curious as to the movements of these operatic people, and being obliged to wait till his own carriage came up, he strolled to and fro, glancing now out of the station at the driving rain and the chilly March night, now at his late companions. As usual, it appeared that 'Signor Valentino' did the work, the others all crowded into the one available fly, and sat impatiently waiting while he hunted up truant trunks and portmanteaux.

'What an age you have been!' was the greeting he received. 'You can't get in here! Perhaps there'll be another fly by this time. Do you think the man can take all the luggage outside?'

'He'll have to,' was the reply. 'There's nothing else to be had nor any chance of getting anything. It seems it is the race week.'

'Can't you change places with him, Signor Gomez?' said Nita, for once in her life prompted to think for her brother. 'His cough is so bad he oughtn't to be out on such a night.'

Gomez made a dignified excuse, and suggested that if they delayed any longer it would be impossible to dine before the opera.

'And by the bye, Val, my dear fellow, just stop in passing at the theatre,' exclaimed Merlino; 'you'll notice it on your way to the hotel, and might just see that all is right there.'

'Very well. Is my umbrella handy?'

They gave it to him and drove off, while Carlo began to wrap up his throat in a huge muffler, looking distastefully enough at the dark, muddy street, and the torrents of rain. He was just about to set off on his wet walk when, on turning to ask the nearest way to the hotel, he suddenly confronted Mr. Britton.

'I am expecting my carriage every minute,' said the Englishman, in his kindly voice, which, but for the absence of the slight tone of patronage, would have been exactly like Captain Britton's. 'I hope you'll allow me to drive you to your hotel.'

'You are most kind,' said Carlo. 'I should indeed be very grateful; but perhaps I ought to tell you——'



He was interrupted. Mr. Britton, glancing round to see if the carriage had come, chanced to notice a huge advertisement of Signor Merlino's Operatic Company, and his eye was instantly caught by a name in large black letters—SIGNOR CARLO DONATI.

'I must beg a thousand pardons, Signor Donati, for not recognising you before!' he exclaimed, shaking him heartily by the hand. 'I thought I knew your face on the Mardentown platform, but I heard them call you by the name of Valentino, and, moreover, had not the slightest idea that you were in England or that you had changed your profession.'

'The change was only just decided on when you left Naples, sir,' said Carlo, his colour rising a little. 'I hope you have good accounts from Casa Bella?'

He tried to subdue the eagerness of his tone, but it was some time since he had heard from Enrico, and the thought of hearing of Francesca in so much more direct a way made every pulse in him beat feverishly.

'Very good, indeed,' said Mr. Britton. 'They all seem well. Francesca is coming to stay with us in the summer, I believe. It was an old promise, and I think the change will be good for her. Here is the carriage at last. Now I am quite at your disposal. Shall we call first at the theatre, and then shall I drop you at your hotel? Or are you, too, in a hurry to get your dinner?'

He had kindly made rather a lengthy speech, because he saw how much the Italian was moved by his reference to Francesca. Carlo asked to stop at the theatre, and Mr. Britton, who understood now that his brother's objection to the marriage had had to do with the stage and not at all with political matters, determined to show that he, at any rate, did not share in his prejudice.

'I suppose Valentino is just a nickname; it misled me altogether,' he said. 'But for that I think I should have spoken to you, and asked, at any rate, whether you were related to Signor Donati, the Neapolitan advocate.'

Carlo smiled. Not for many months had he had such a pleasure as that friendly talk with Francesca's uncle.

'It is the name of what is supposed to be my best part—Valentino in *Faust*,' he explained.

'I see. Well, I must manage to hear you in it. It is twenty years and more since I heard an opera.'

'Then you have never heard *Faust*?' exclaimed Carlo,

almost incredulously. 'We are to give it to-night; may I really have the pleasure of getting you an order?'

'You are very good; I should like nothing better,' said Mr. Britton, fully understanding that since his lady-love could not be present to hear him the next best thing was to have her old uncle, who might possibly tell her something about it. He felt convinced that such a thought had flashed through the young man's mind, and liked him the better for it, because, after all, it was so human, so precisely what he himself would have felt at four-and-twenty.

'You have a very bad cough!' he exclaimed, quite agreeing with the *prima donna* that Donati had no business to be out on such a night.

'Oh, it is only chronic!' said Carlo, lightly, as if that made it an affair of no account. 'Is this the theatre? Will you then come in with me, and choose your place for to-night?'

The ticket chosen, Carlo and Mr. Britton made their way through long and not particularly clean passages to the region behind the scenes. Here all seemed confusion; carpenters and scene-shifters hurried to and fro; there was a babel of talking, shouting, hammering; and Carlo's arrival was evidently hailed as a relief by the man in authority, who came quickly up to him to explain some difficulty that had arisen, and to ask whether Merlino would soon be at the theatre. Mr. Britton, meantime, was learning that scenery and stage illusions were disenchanting enough when nearly viewed, and in his own mind was wondering whether anything could possibly teach him to walk respectably on the sloping stage. It was evident that Carlo was a practical man, for his suggestions were received as orders, and something like method began to be traceable in what had at first seemed the wildest chaos.

'I must not keep you waiting any longer,' he said, after a few minutes, coming up to Mr. Britton; 'thank you for all your kindness. They seem to have got behindhand here, and I must stay and help them a little.'

'Will you not come and dine with me at the club?' said Mr. Britton; 'it is close by.'

'You are very good,' said Carlo, looking at his watch, 'but, to tell the truth, it is too late for me to dine now. I shouldn't be able to sing if I did.'

'I hope you don't intend to starve yourself,' said the Englishman. 'Surely that can't be good for the voice.'

'No,' said Carlo, smiling; 'I shall send out for some oysters, or perhaps take a raw egg or two.' Then, seeing Mr.

Britton's look of commiseration, he laughed. 'You know we make up for it at supper. I shall be as hungry as a hunter by the time the opera is over.'

'Then I cannot take you to the hotel?'

'I think not, thank you; I must be here for the present. When all is ready I daresay I shall run and see that Gigi is none the worse for his fright, but they tell me it is close by. You will remember me to Miss Claremont.'

'She will be delighted to hear you are in England; you must come over to see us at Merlebank; we are not much more than two miles from the town. Good-bye then for the present, and I hope you'll find the little boy has suffered no ill effects.'

It was not till nearly eight o'clock that Carlo could snatch a minute to run and see after Gigi; hurrying along the wet and cheerless street he made his way to the hotel, and on the doorstep came suddenly upon Sardoni, who had gone on to Ashborough on the previous night with the rest of the company.

'So here you are at last,' he exclaimed, 'doing the dirty work as usual, I see. How are you, Val? I declare you look better.'

In truth the meeting with Mr. Britton and the pleasure of having rescued Gigi had acted as a sort of stimulus, and Carlo, spite of a very tiring day, felt better than he had done for some months past.

'I'm as strong as a horse,' he said, laughing, 'should come in neck and neck with the winner of the Mountshire Handicap on Monday. Where is Gigi?'

'Sitting on the stairs when I last saw him; the place is packed, and I'm afraid they won't have given you much of a room; Gomez snapped up the only decent one.'

Carlo waited for no more, but ran upstairs till he came upon the disconsolate figure of the little boy.

'Have you had something to eat, *mio caro*? ' he asked, taking the child in his arms and carrying him on.

'Yes, but there's no bed for me,' said Gigi, piteously.

'How's that? one was ordered. Where have they put my portmanteau?'

'Up at the top,' said Gigi, mournfully, 'in No. 62; but there's no bed for me.'

Carlo rang to inquire, only to be told that, the house being quite full for the race week, no more beds were available; and the only room, No. 62, proved to be a servant's room vacated just for the occasion, a dismal little place under the roof,

smelling strongly of stale ham sandwiches. In the corner was one narrow truckle-bed.

'Never mind, Gigi,' said Carlo, passing his arm round the child's neck, and winking a smile on the dismal little face; 'you've slept in the overland trunk before now. Let us see if you have grown too long for it; you know it was rather fun last time. Yes?'

Gigi measured himself by the trunk, to the infinite amusement of the chambermaid, who volunteered to find him a pair of sheets.

'But as to blankets, sir, they're every blessed one of them in use,' she added.

'Never mind, one of mine doubled will do for him,' said Carlo, ruthlessly stripping the truckle-bed. 'Now, Gigi, unlock the trunk for me, and we'll turn the things out on the floor and make room for you.'

Gigi thought this fine fun; and what with pillows and blanket from the truckle-bed, and clean sheets which the chambermaid brought hot from the fire, the improvised crib was comfortable enough. But to Carlo it somehow suggested a coffin, and the thought of the danger the child had been in made him shudder as he bent down to kiss him.

'I do love you so,' said Gigi, clinging to him with all his might. And Carlo hurried back to the theatre with the words ringing in his ears, and the feeling of the little child's arms still about his neck.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### 'CLARE'

'But when I met him he was still the same;  
The quiet, happy face that lighted up  
As from a sunshine in the heart within,  
Rejoicing whomsoever looked on it,  
But far more whomsoever it looked on.'

*Ugo Bassi: MRS. HAMILTON KING.*

THE schoolroom at Merlebank was one of those comfortable, nondescript sort of rooms, which have a charm for most people; it was a room where you did not feel bound to be on your best behaviour,—a room where you could read with both elbows on

the table, or lounge in unconventional ease by the fireside. It was essentially a snug room, its green Brussels carpet was comfortably shabby, its curtains were old-fashioned and faded, its walls were crowded with frameless oil-paintings, which the girls had brought home from the School of Art, and the books in its crowded book-shelves had evidently seen good service. Miss Claremont loved the room, and it was in a great measure her presence which helped to make it one of the pleasantest retreats in the house. In lesson hours she knew well enough how to make any unwary visitor feel himself *de trop*, but at all other times, on half holidays, or on Sundays, or in the long evenings, she liked nothing better than to sit and talk to anyone who chose to seek her out. She had now been at Merlebank for many years, and had given to each of the children the 'mothering' they so much needed. In person Clare was short and slight, she was an insignificant-looking little woman, and took scant pains with her dress. But all these details were observed only by strangers; to those who knew her she was just 'Clare,' the one being in the world whose sympathy was always available, the only person who could brighten up a dull dinner, or entertain stupid visitors, or find good points in those whom the girls themselves condemned as odiously vulgar.

All the troubles and anxieties of the household gravitated by a natural law to the schoolroom. Clare would sit by the fire in winter, or by the open window in summer, and would listen to Mr. Britton's anxieties about the children, or to the grandmother's grief about her failing eyesight, or to Kate's difficulties in her district, or to the boys' hopes and fears with regard to examinations, or first loves, or vanished pocket-money. Her clear, light-blue eyes could sparkle with fun, or grow soft with pity, or become thoughtful and patient, as she weighed the *pros* and *cons* of some puzzling question; she was the most delightful of confidantes, and her wide circle of friends did not scruple to work her pretty hard, for Clare was always supposed to like to hear everyone's woes. Probably she really did like it, and few went away from her un comforted, for somehow you were apt to leave the schoolroom feeling as if she had removed a crape veil from before your eyes, so that the most common and trivial matters of everyday life became far more interesting than you had imagined them to be.

Late on that March evening Mr. Britton, returning from Ashborough, made all speed towards the schoolroom, and, as he had hoped, found Clare still sitting over the fire reading.

'The children have all gone to bed,' she explained; 'Kate

waited till half-past ten, but she was tired with her choir practice.'

'I am glad to find you up,' said Mr. Britton, 'for I have a message to you from an old friend of yours, who, to my great astonishment, proves to be in England.'

'Not Francesca!' exclaimed Clare.

'Her next-door neighbour, young Donati; he sends you his kind regards and is very anxious to see you.'

'Well, that is really a delightful surprise,' said Clare. 'I should like so much to meet him again, for as a boy he interested me a good deal. What can have brought him to England?'

'He has developed a voice, and has turned into an operatic singer. That quite explains my brother's determination to have less to do with him, for you know the Captain disapproves of the stage as much as you do. However, I think I have managed to put two and two together, and to form a pretty shrewd guess as to Donati's reason for his sudden change of profession. It seems he has a sister; did you know her?'

'She was being educated in a convent when I was in Italy, but I saw her once or twice. Poor girl! she made some very foolish marriage, I believe, not long after we came to England. I never heard the rights of the story, but I know she eloped with someone.'

'Oh, that was it! Well, she seems to have paid dearly for her folly, poor thing! for her husband is a brute, a more sullen, ill-tempered fellow I never saw. He is the Impresario of this travelling company which Donati has joined; the sister, Madame Merlino, is the *prima donna*. Let me see, what did he call her? Nita, I think.'

'That was her name. I remember her as a demure little girl, shocked at Francesca's freedom.'

'Well, she seems to be one of those pretty, helpless, unhappy wives who stand in such grave need of a protector. Now, when I was at Naples I heard nothing at all about this sister, but on the Sunday, Donati was introduced to me by my brother as one of the most promising young advocates at the Neapolitan bar, and his praises were sung to me in a way which I own rather prejudiced me against him. I couldn't help liking the fellow when I saw him, however; and you can imagine my surprise when, on the Tuesday morning, I found that my brother had quarrelled with him, and that their friendship was at an end. He had decided on some course of action which the Captain disapproved, and said you would also dis-

approve. However, the matter was a private affair of Donati's, and he bound me over to silence, telling me, however, that I should soon see all for myself, and should then agree with him. I got quite on a wrong tack, and thought it was some political difference, but surely this is the true explanation. I appeal to you now, Miss Claremont, as a reader of romances:—given a pretty actress, with a brute of a husband, and doubtless some not too reputable admirers, is it not conceivable that circumstances might arise which should induce her father or her brother to sacrifice everything in order to save her?'

'Quite,' said Clare; 'and Carlo Donati would be the very man to throw himself into the breach in that way; there was something chivalrous about him, something one doesn't often meet with nowadays. Do you remember Mrs. Browning's lines—

"The world's male chivalry has perished out,  
But women are knights-errant to the last"?

I always thought she wouldn't have written that if she had known Carlo.'

'I think there is no doubt that he is playing the part of knight-errant now,' said Mr. Britton, musingly; 'and that he has a hard time of it. I doubt if he will succeed, though. The sister seemed to be a very shallow, heartless little woman. He is a noble fellow, much too good to be wasted on such a life.'

He gave Clare a detailed account of what had passed that afternoon.

'I am sorry he has gone on the stage,' she said. 'I hoped he would have done great things. It seems to me that a man like that might have wonderful influence in public life.'

'And yet in some ways he is admirably fitted for his present work,' said Mr. Britton. 'His voice is very fine, and his acting really first-rate; I went to hear him to-night, and was delighted with him. Would you care to see him to-morrow? I want you to look him up, for I think, poor fellow, he is leading the life of a dog; and he seemed so pleased at the thought of meeting you again. I have promised that the carriage shall take the Vicar into Ashborough in the afternoon; he preaches at St. Cyprian's in the evening. Would you like to go in, too? You might, perhaps, go for a drive with young Donati.'

'It would be the best chance of seeing him alone,' said Clare. 'Thank you, I think I will go, and on Sunday I suppose he is sure to be disengaged.'

Accordingly the next day Clare, having set down the Vicar

at St. Cyprian's parsonage, drove to the Royal Hotel, and sent in her card with a little pencilled message asking Carlo to come for a drive. As she waited there she felt a little anxious, and even shy, for after all it was many years since she had seen Carlo. Would time have raised a barrier between them? Would Signor Donati, the public singer, be less approachable than the frank, light-hearted, Italian boy, who at one time had almost worshipped her? The first glimpse of him, however, dispelled all her fears; he came quickly forward with the same eager boyish manner which she recollected so well, and took both her hands in his.

'How good, how kind of you to come!' he exclaimed. 'This is the greatest pleasure I have had for a long time. Gigi,' he turned to pick up a small boy, 'this is Miss Claremont. Should you mind, Clare, if I brought him with me? Sunday has come to be considered his special property.'

Clare was delighted to welcome the little fellow, and made many inquiries about his narrow escape of the previous day.

'What a great pleasure it must be to you now to feel that you saved him!' she said. 'I have often wondered how a rescuer would feel afterwards.'

'It's a satisfaction to feel that I have not failed in one thing undertaken,' said Carlo, rather sadly.

At first sight Clare had thought him hardly altered, but on looking more closely at him she saw that his face, when in repose, bore signs of friction; and, though still very young-looking, told plainly of grief and sorrow undergone.

'That is a sad way of putting it,' she said. 'I thought, too, that you had had such very great success,—Mr. Britton led me to believe so.'

'You see,' he replied, 'every artist leads a double life; just at that moment I was thinking more of my own personal side of the question, but really sometimes I think I'm making a failure of both.'

'But you have surely had a very rapid success?'

'Don't think I am ungrateful for my reception,' he said. 'I know I have made what the world calls a success, but I'm not yet satisfied with myself; and each time I go on the stage I feel that I may fail utterly. An artist's life is a life of eternal anxiety. But then to counterbalance that we have moments of inspiration, and they are worth all.'

Clare was surprised at his sudden fervour.

'You really like your new profession, then?' she said. 'I remember you were always fond of music.'



'I don't know how I should get on without it,' he said. 'It is not only the music that is such a great delight, it is the getting out of one's own world, the living in the characters of others, the sense of holding the attention of one's audience and playing upon their emotions, and the pleasure of giving pleasure. Besides, there is a kind of satisfaction in being what you were meant to be.'

'Had you long intended to take up this way of life?'

'No; but Piale had fully educated me for it. I was an advocate, you know, though I had never practised.'

'And I suppose it was your wish to be near your sister which prompted you to make the change?' she said.

He was surprised, and yet relieved, that she had guessed as much.

'It was my last promise to our mother,' he said. But he was quite silent as to the sacrifice it had been to him to take up the profession; and Clare, who had not the faintest suspicion of his love for Francesca, could not, of course, realise what he had been through. She wondered whether his plan had been a wise one, and recalled Mr. Britton's description of Madame Merlino, and his conviction that in this case chivalry would not avail.

'I know you don't approve of the stage,' he said. 'Had I thought you would have seen things as I saw them I should have written to you when we first came to England, for I was horribly lonely then.'

'I wish you had,' she said, with warm sympathy. 'Indeed, I should not have argued with you through the post! Nor will I argue now. It is quite impossible for me really to judge: I know too little about the stage.'

'Yet you do disapprove in your secret heart,' he said, rather wistfully. He could not help longing for Clare's benediction on his efforts.

'Perhaps it seems to me a little like doing evil that good may come,' she said, hesitatingly. 'But that may be only my British prejudice.'

Then, seeing a sad look in his eyes, she added, quickly,—

'But, as I said before, Carlo, it is impossible for me to judge. What did Captain Britton say to it?'

'He shared in the British prejudice.'

A look of such deep pain flashed across his face that her heart smote her; she had spoken without very much thought, forgetting that Carlo would probably feel sore-hearted still at the recollection of the quarrel with the Captain which Mr.

Britton had mentioned. Of the true state of the case he had nothing to tell her, and the best of friends cannot avoid now and then wounding each other in the dark.

'As a matter of fact, you know,' she said, in her sweet, bright way, 'I am a very ignorant woman as to these matters. I have never been inside a theatre, I have never come across people connected with the stage, and I have no doubt that the evils connected with theatrical life are painted more darkly than they need be. Indeed, I should be very glad if you could convert me.'

'Then this shall be the first step in your conversion,' he said, smiling. 'Look at these two ladies whom we are just going to pass on the left.'

Clare looked, Gigi kissed his hand, and the ladies bowed and smiled as Carlo raised his hat.

'The tall one has a beautiful face!' exclaimed Clare. 'So dignified and sweet.'

'That is Mlle. Borelli, our contralto; she is one of the noblest women I know. The other is Mlle. Duroc, her great friend.'

'A nice face, but not so striking as the other,' was Clare's comment. 'Well, Carlo, I am glad to have seen them. Perhaps you will some day convert me altogether and make me approve of theatres.'

The talk turned on other matters, and before they parted Clare made Carlo promise to come over to Merlebank the next afternoon, and to bring Gigi with him.

Curiously enough, however, the question of theatrical life was to be handled once more that day, and not with Clare's moderation.

St. Cyprian's was some way from the Royal Hotel; but Carlo, having chanced upon a very dreary service in the morning at a neighbouring church, was determined to go farther afield, and hearing from Sardoni that it was considered one of the finest churches in England, resolved to seek it out.

'It's at least a mile,' said Sardoni; 'however, the choir is worth hearing, and if you're going I don't mind going with you.'

So the two set off together, arriving somewhat late, and having to content themselves with places at the very back of the church. Carlo felt strangely tired; but he was very happy in having met Clare and Mr. Britton once more, and he was glad Sardoni had volunteered to come with him. The beautiful building, and the music, and the service, which was always

associated in his mind with Naples and Francesca, would, even in their mere external aspect, have been a refreshment; and he was gaining the rest he much needed when the sermon began, and startled him back into his working-day existence. For the preacher, sitting in his country vicarage, and well conversant with all the pleasures of the country, which seemed to him the only pleasures worth enumerating, had written a fierce diatribe against the pleasures of the town, and notably against theatre-going. Perhaps it had not occurred to him that members of the obnoxious theatrical profession might be numbered in his flock; apparently he considered them all to be reprobates, for he spoke of them in no measured terms, and denounced their profession as an unhallowed calling. Carlo was the more pained by the attack, because the preacher was evidently a man of great earnestness, a good, upright, honest man, not a mere denouncer. It was hard, too, to have his brief respite from work disturbed and spoiled by so untimely an assault. He tried not to listen, but the mere desire not to hear made it impossible for him to lose himself in other thoughts, and whether he would or no the words fell upon his ear.

'My brethren,' continued the preacher, 'I look at the hoardings in your town and see how, even in this solemn time of Lent, the world seeks to ensnare you. I see that, not content with the usual number of theatres, another must be opened for the performance of operas; and I fear that you may be tempted perhaps to snatch at a passing pleasure. Let me urge you to withstand the temptation; let me implore you, as you value the health of your own souls, to shun this false and ensnaring pleasure, the influence of which must be harmful—may be deadly. Most truly, most wisely do we sing the words—

" Christian, dost thou see them  
On the holy ground;  
How the troops of Midian  
Prowl and prowl around?"

Carlo was for the moment so much tickled by the implied comparison between the wandering troupe of Merlino and the prowling troops of Midian, that he had some difficulty in keeping his countenance. He did not dare to look at Sardoni; but, taking up a book, read the rest of the hymn, reflecting sadly that even the much-abused members of the 'unhallowed calling' did sometimes try their best to overcome 'By the merit of the holy Cross.' The attack grieved him; it seemed like

the embodiment of the cause which had separated him from Francesca. He had learnt, moreover, to love his profession; he believed in it with all his heart; he knew that it need no more be an unhallowed calling than the calling of the poet, or the painter, or the sculptor, or the novelist. This preacher clearly failed to understand the highest meaning of art—he had no sense of the artistic side of life; neither had he any sense of humour, or he would instantly have perceived the ludicrous turn which might be given to his application of the 'troops of Midian.'

This particular Midianite began to wonder whether, if he from the stage had begged people to shun the church and to refrain from giving at the offertory, the preacher would not have denounced him as a man who wilfully robbed another of his daily bread. He went on to picture to himself the immediate consequences of any marked falling-off in the attendance at the theatre: he thought of the heavy loss to Merlino, the severe trial to his temper, the consequent misery and suffering of all about him, the possible effect on Anita. Then he went on to generalities, and tried to imagine the effect upon art if the best and purest followed the preacher's advice, and went no more to the theatre. He saw how the good, and the elevating, and the lofty in the drama would perforce fail for lack of support; and how the only thing that would pay would be that which pandered to the lowest and vilest tastes. He felt that the members of his profession, in such a state of things, would be placed in a grave dilemma; unfit for any other calling, they would be forced either to let their talents rust unused, and to sink into poverty and distress, or to debase themselves by taking work which they knew to be unworthy of them.

He would have liked to put such a case to the preacher, and he felt curious to see what sort of man he was; but they were quite at the back of the church, and an intervening pillar hid the pulpit from view.

Feeling, somehow, that the sermon had shut him out from the fellowship which he expected to find in a church, and had made him an alien even in the body to which he rightfully belonged, he made his way out again into the dark, dreary street, up which the March wind blew gustily. A sense of intolerable fatigue came over him.

'What a pace you are walking at, Jack!' he exclaimed. 'One might think you were blessed with the seven-leagued boots, and were keeping up with Sirocco!'

Sardoni modified his pace ; and Carlo, glancing at him, saw an expression about his mouth which boded no good.

‘I’m sorry we came in for that sermon,’ he said.

‘Well, at any rate, it will serve to show you what British prejudice is!’ said Sardoni, speaking more fiercely than the occasion seemed to warrant. ‘I don’t know what effect it will have as to theatre-going, but I know that I shan’t darken the doors of a church again in a hurry!’

Carlo was silent, knowing that his companion was far too angry to be reasoned with ; and not another word passed between them on their way back to the hotel.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### AN ENGLISH HOME

‘Nor hath thy knowledge of adversity  
Robbed thee of any faith in happiness,  
But rather cleared thine inner eyes to see  
How many simple ways there are to bless.’

LOWELL

THE next day, according to his promise, Carlo went over to Merlebank.

‘How good of you to come,’ said Clare, hastening forward to greet him as he was shown into the drawing-room ; ‘I was afraid this gloomy afternoon might frighten you away. I must introduce you to Francesca’s cousins whom you have so often heard of.’

Carlo looked eagerly enough to see if he could trace any likeness to Francesca in the four girls who came up in frank and friendly fashion to shake hands with him. Kate, the eldest, was about her age, and he instantly perceived that she had the same English-grey eyes—dark grey, with no blue in their depths. Though, however, she was a nice-looking girl, she made no pretensions to beauty ; but every now and then a tone in her voice would thrill him by its likeness to Francesca’s, and he felt much attracted by her, though he perceived at once that she was passing judgment on him, and that her manner was more critical and less friendly than that of the younger girls.

Lucy, the second sister, was fairer and prettier, and seemed

to be the sweet-tempered one of the family, but she interested him less than Kate, whose slightly aggressive manner piqued him into curiosity. Molly was a rather tomboyish young person of fourteen, with a frank hail-fellow-well-met manner ; and Flo, the baby of the family, was just eleven, a slim little girl, with short, fair hair, and very short petticoats, who enjoyed life in a kittenish sort of way, and while much petted by everyone in the house, had somehow just escaped spoiling.

Clare sat, looking wonderfully natural, in the corner of the big Chesterfield sofa, and made him sit beside her, where they could talk comfortably together, a little removed from the group of girls who, on the other side of the hearth, clustered round Gigi and made much of him. The drawing-room was such a room as Carlo had never before seen, and after the weary round of dingy lodgings and second-rate hotels to which he had of late been accustomed he could fully appreciate it. It reminded him just a little of the *salotto* at Casa Bella in its air of comfort and homelikeness, but whereas the Casa Bella room had a semi-Italian air, from its Cantigalli *plaques* and pottery, and its striped silk *couvrettes*, this room was thoroughly and typically English. A second room, visible by day, was curtained off in the evening, when snugness reigned supreme ; a fire of coals, crowned by a huge log, burned in the low, wide grate, and sent a ruddy glow over the brass fender and dainty brass fireirons ; while a warm-toned Persian carpet and wall-flowered red curtains harmonised well with the salmon-tinted walls, upon which were gathered a wealth of pictures that at once attracted Carlo's eye, though the names on the massive gilt frames, Brett, Ansdell, Vicat Cole, and Millais, conveyed to him, as a foreigner, no special meaning.

Clare was a little afraid of alluding to Casa Bella after her rather careless speech of the preceding day, but she spoke of the Ritters, and of other mutual friends, and asked endless questions about Naples and Pozzuoli which Carlo was enchanted to answer. For many months he had been utterly cut off from all his old ties, and from the people who could sympathise with them ; it was delightful to him to go over the familiar ground once more with some one who knew it and loved it almost as well as he did. To be with Clare again made him feel strangely young and light-hearted. He forgot Anita and Comerio ; he forgot all the petty jealousies and disputes of the Company ; he even forgot his own private troubles, found genuine relief in speaking Francesca's name, and could almost have fancied that he was once more a boy,

resolving to work and wait till he could present his name to Captain Britton with the prefix of *Avvocato*.

'You can stay a nice long time, I hope!' said Clare. 'Mr. Britton will be coming in soon, I think, and he specially wished to see you. He so much enjoyed your singing on Saturday.'

'This is my off day,' explained Carlo, 'so I am not bound to be back by any special time. It is *Fra Diavolo* to-night, and I have no part in that.'

'Is that your only chance of a holiday? Do you mean that you sing all the other nights of the week?'

'That just depends on whether the engagements dovetail into each other. Very often they do. When the town is important we generally stay a week, and then the round seldom varies. Arrive on Sunday, *Faust* on Monday, *Fra Diavolo* Tuesday, *Sonnambula* Wednesday, *Lucia* Thursday, *Barbiere* Friday, *Rigoletto* Saturday, on to the next place on Sunday.'

'Is the travelling always done on Sunday?'

'Not always, but very frequently. You see it is the only day you close your theatres. Now with us the theatres are shut on Friday, but we play our best operas in our best style on the *Festa*. There is something to be said for both sides of the question. Last week we had engagements of two and three nights only at small places, and travelled here in detachments, the bulk of the company by special train on Friday evening, the rest of us on Saturday afternoon. So at Ashborough the days are slightly varied, and on Thursday we move on to Queenbury for two nights.'

'It must be a very hard life,' said Clare.

'It is no light work, as some people seem to fancy, specially when the winter is so severe.'

'Yes, you must have felt the cold dreadfully.'

'I have at any rate learnt to appreciate warmth. The only drawback is that in England it seems impossible to be warm on both sides at once. You may scorch your shins at the fire, and yet the back of your leg will still be frozen! But I see you understand here how to build up a glorious fire. We don't come across such fireplaces as that.'

While he talked he watched with the interest of a foreigner all that was going on, wondered for what reason the footman appeared with a trivet and a bright copper kettle, and speculated as to the little folding table which was being set up on the other side of the fireplace. A daintily-worked cloth was spread over it, then came the explanation in the form of a

beautifully inlaid ebony and silver tray, with the most fascinating of silver tea-services, and delicate blue and white china cups.

'This is just like Salem,' announced Gigi. 'We've never had real proper tea since Salem.'

Carlo, seeing that Kate had some unknown designs on the copper kettle, hastened to offer his services.

'Tea-making is a process I have never seen,' he said, wondering what on earth he was to do with the kettle now that he had valiantly seized upon it.

'Thank you, a little in the teapot, please,' said Kate. 'That will do.'

He restored it to the trivet, and noticed that Kate's hands were exactly like Francesca's. He could not take his eyes off them as she measured out tea from a pretty little silver caddy with a silver cockleshell. They were not luxuriously brought up girls, in spite of their father's wealth. They were accustomed to helping themselves, and did not care to have servants always at their beck and call. Indeed, Kate was of so independent a nature that she would willingly have dispensed with Carlo's assistance, and observing that the kettle did not boil, she set it further back on the trivet, and with something a little defiant in her expression, prepared to take it off at the critical minute.

'What was the first edition for?' asked Carlo.

'Oh, that was to warm the teapot, a very important part of the matter,' she explained.

'Pray let me have my share in this mysterious process,' said Carlo, forestalling her as she was about to carry off the kettle in triumph. 'It has to me, you know, all the interest of a new experiment in chemistry.'

'You don't mean to say Francesca hasn't introduced afternoon tea yet at Casa Bella?'

There was a general exclamation.

'You see in Italy we naturally enough go in more for cooling drinks. She was very clever at making lemonade.'

He felt himself colouring at the recollection of that hot summer day in the Rose-room, and was glad to turn his back on the five pair of eyes, and to put the kettle again on the trivet. A further diversion was made by the entrance of the servant with cakes and thin bread-and-butter and a great dish of crumpets, which was set down in the fender to keep hot. There was something charmingly easy and informal in the whole thing, Carlo thought; he wondered what it was that gave the English their special power of making homes, and



once more the tone of Kate's voice took him back with a pang that was half of pleasure, half of pain, to the thought of Francesca. For a minute he called up the picture of what might have been. He saw the Villa Bruno with the alterations which she would have made in it; he possessed in imagination the wife and the home which he had renounced; and the dream was so sweet that it was almost worth the revulsion of feeling which quickly followed.

There must have been a brain-wave between him and Kate, for at that moment she startled him with the question, 'I suppose they have new neighbours now at Casa Bella? Who took your house when you left?'

'It was taken by Count Carossa,' he replied. 'Mr. Britton met him at Naples on Whit Sunday. He has a yacht not unlike the *Pilgrim*, and was anchored close by.'

'I remember now, father mentioned him. What sort of man is he? Will Uncle Britton like him?'

'I believe he was much taken with him,' replied Carlo, hearing his own calm replies with a sort of astonishment.

'Uncle is dreadfully fond of people with titles,' said Kate. 'It is his one weakness. Is Count Carossa really nice, do you think?'

'I have only met him once,' replied Carlo. 'He is quite young and very rich, rather an original sort of man, has travelled a great deal, and is a good *raconteur*.'

He ran off the list of his rival's merits unfalteringly, but was secretly relieved by an interruption.

'Don't you hear wheels?' exclaimed Lucy, opening the drawing-room door that she might listen better.

'Yes, it is father!' cried little Flo, 'for Bevis is waking up. See,' she said, drawing Carlo's attention to a very old deer-hound which lay stretched out comfortably on the hearth-rug. 'Bevis always does that when he hears the carriage, but when it is only people coming to call he sleeps right on.'

In the hall there was a little bustle of arrival and welcome. The return of the father and son from business made one of the pleasantest of the daily events in that quiet country household. They brought with them a sort of atmosphere of the world which was refreshing. Generally there were commissions to be delivered, or library books to be eagerly seized upon, and invariably there was some sort of news to be discussed. Carlo realised something of this as Mr. Britton came into the room with Lucy, his favourite daughter, clinging to his arm, and the dog Oscar, son to the elderly Bevis, at his heels.

The shipbuilder never showed to greater advantage than in

his own house. Looking now at his clear grey eyes, his refined face, his thick white hair and snowy, well-kept beard, he seemed to Carlo the perfection of an English gentleman. His manner was delightful, a little more courteous than the manner of the Englishmen Carlo had hitherto come across, but free from all suspicion of formality, a manner that was genuinely friendly without being in the least over-familiar. He gave Carlo a hearty welcome, and turned to introduce him to his son, who seemed to be much what Mr. Britton must have been forty years ago.

Harry Britton had not yet acquired, however, his father's easy, genial way of talking; he seemed not quite at his ease with the Italian; and, after the greetings were over, moved away with a perceptible air of relief, which tickled Carlo not a little, and began to open the shiny black bag which he held in his left hand. From this he proceeded to dole forth various purchases which the girls had asked him to make, ending with the evening paper, which he as usual brought dutifully to Clare, with a little time-honoured joke which had for them all a halo of happy associations.

Carlo watched the little bit of by-play, and understood it all perfectly. It brought back to his mind the old days when Clare was in Italy, and had been to him just such a true, staunch, cheery friend as she was now to Harry Britton. To his tired brain there was something indescribably refreshing in that glimpse of home-life. It was a scene which he never forgot, and which often returned to him with a sense of comfort in his wandering, homeless life. For there are people so genuine, so English, so whole-hearted, that they can make even afternoon callers feel, for the time being, one of themselves—can send them forth again with a pleasant, living picture in their hearts, and a consciousness that there is true friendliness and good-fellowship in a world which had seemed to them for the most part a place of weary formality and routine.

He felt a great wish to do something for these people, and knowing that etiquette forbade them to ask him to sing, and that Clare was anxious to hear him, he took advantage of some reference which Mr. Britton made to his singing in *Faust*, to offer to sing them '*Dio Possente*.'

The unmistakable look of real delight which greeted the suggestion, and the eager way in which Molly and Flo ran to open the piano, pleased him more than the loudest public applause could have done. He sang very well, and entranced his hearers, rousing even Harry out of his shy reserve.

'Do you ever sing English songs?' he asked, when the chorus of thanks had ceased, volunteering his first uncalled-for remark to the Italian.

'Not very often,' replied Carlo, wondering whether he could get through 'Love for a Life,' and, after a moment's debate, deciding to risk it for the sake of pleasing Francesca's cousin. 'There is one song by my old Maestro with English words. Perhaps you know it?'

He struck a few chords, then broke into the introduction to the song which transported him once more to that first happy day of his betrothal. To sing it was hard, and yet his very emotion gave him a power which he would not otherwise have possessed,—it made him able to bring tears into the eyes of more than one of his listeners—it set kind-hearted Mr. Britton weaving plans for a reconciliation, and imagining a happy ending to Francesca's love-story.

'I sang that for you,' said Carlo, with a little bow of acknowledgment for Harry's warm thanks. 'Now, if you are not quite tired of me, I should very much like to sing one song for Miss Claremont. You must choose it, Clare,' he said, turning to her, and looking with a smile into her sympathetic eyes.

'May I really choose?' she said. 'Then I should like that old favourite of mine, "The Pilgrim of Love."'

'That will also be an indirect compliment to the yacht,' said Carlo, laughing. 'Or was that called after the *Pilgrim's Progress*? But let me see, can I get through the words? How do you pronounce that bit I always used to come to grief over?'

"Nay, nay, courteous father"?' suggested Clare, recalling merry disputes in the Casa Bella drawing-room.

'That was it! "Curteous" or "corteous"—how do you say it?'

They laughed over the old discussions, and discussed them over again, and after some little delay Carlo sang the song, and finally left them to be haunted for many a day to come by the refrain, 'No rest but the grave for the pilgrim of love.'

'He seems a nice sort of fellow!' was Harry's comment, when, the guests having departed, his natural manner returned to him. 'I say, it didn't matter, did it, my asking him if he sang English songs? I thought none of those operatic fellows did.'

'Oh, dear no,' said Clare. 'Nothing pleases Carlo so much as to give pleasure.'

‘Well, it was awfully jolly of him to sing such a lot. He doesn’t seem a bit stuck up. But, I say, why on earth can’t they be called like ordinary Christians? Carlo and Gigi! Did you ever hear of a more horsey and doggy couple!’

‘That’s just your narrow-mindedness,’ said Clare, laughing. ‘Carlo is as good a name as Charles, and Gigi sounds no more foolish to an Italian than Johnny or Tommy to us.’

‘Well, Clare, for my part I don’t understand your Signor Donati. If he is the sort of man he seems to be, why does he live such a useless life?’ said Kate, with the severity of three-and-twenty.

‘He may have many reasons which we don’t understand,’ said Clare. ‘However, I candidly confess that I wish he would leave the stage. He looks to me terribly delicate.’

‘He is far too good for that Company,’ said Mr. Britton. ‘I shouldn’t be at all surprised if he did leave the stage before long. I hope he may—I hope he may! There’s something about him which quite fascinates one, though I do wish he could have been an Englishman.’

The laughter evoked by this truly British remark was only checked by the warning clock, which made Clare and the younger girls beat a hasty retreat to the schoolroom, and sent Kate to read to her invalid grandmother, and to moralise in her own mind over Carlo’s mistake in choosing so unworthy a profession.

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## CHAPTER XXV

### A LAST STRUGGLE

‘O sweet, they tell me that the world is hard and harsh of mind,  
But can it be so hard, so harsh, as those that should be kind?  
That matters not; let come what will; at last the end is sure,  
And every heart that loves with truth is equal to endure.’

TENNYSON.

‘Now, Miss Claremont, suppose just for once you were to come to the theatre!’ remarked Mr. Britton at breakfast the next morning. ‘I see they are giving *Il Barbiere* on Wednesday night, and I have a sort of hankering to hear it once more. Will you come? Shall I take a box?’

But Clare was too staunch to her Puritan traditions, though

she owned that she would much have liked to hear Carlo. As yet, however, he had not converted her; she still regarded the stage as at best a necessary evil, and felt bound to refuse Mr. Britton's offer.

'Then ask Signor Donati over to lunch to-morrow; it will be your last chance of seeing him; and I am afraid it is no good asking him to dinner, because, apparently, he can't sing after eating, and has to dine at some unconscionably early hour.'

'I shall be going in to Ashborough at twelve o'clock in the pony-carriage, Clare,' remarked Kate. 'I can leave a note for you, if you like; or will you come in with me?'

Clare, who was fond of driving, said she should like to come, so when lessons were ended she joined her ex-pupil, and, well wrapped up, was able to enjoy even the stretch of bleak, dusty road that lay between Merlebank and Ashborough.

'We need not leave the note, for there is Signor Donati!' exclaimed Kate, as they drove down the High Street. 'I do hate to see a man in fur like that. He seems to coddle himself dreadfully. Harry says he took quite an age wrapping up his throat last night.'

'We will just stop a minute or two, if you don't mind,' said Clare. 'I will speak to him, and see if he can come.'

Carlo did not at first notice them. He was walking rather slowly down the street, with Gigi, as usual, clinging to his hand. He looked ill and depressed, but when Gigi eagerly drew his attention to the pony-carriage and its occupants, his face lighted up, and he seemed for the time to return to his old self.

'We were just coming to ask you to lunch with us to-morrow,' said Clare. 'Will you come, you and Gigi? I suppose you couldn't dine with us, could you?'

'I'm afraid not, thank you, for I'm singing both to-night and to-morrow; but I shall be very glad to come over to lunch.'

He had a short, hard cough, which made Clare look at him anxiously.

'You look very poorly to-day, Carlo,' she said.

'I awoke to the sad consciousness that the wind had gone back to the east,' he said, laughing.

'And that cough? It seems very bad.'

'Oh, it is only chronic!' he said, with a smile. 'We have all suffered more or less from the long winter. It must be nearly over now; don't you think?'

'April and May are often nearly as cold,' said Kate, perversely.

'Are they?' he said, with an expressive gesture. 'My friend Sardoni has just given me a song called "Welcome, cold North-easter," but the very words make one's teeth chatter!'

'One o'clock to-morrow, then,' said Clara, as they drove on again.

He took off his hat and bowed in foreign fashion, and was sedulously imitated by Gigi.

'Dreadfully Italian!' said Kate, whipping up the ponies with a touch of irritation in her manner. 'I can't bear a man to be a sort of barometer—pretending to know which way the wind is before he has been out: such nonsense!'

'I have known many people with susceptible chests who were able to do that,' said Clara.

'But no Englishman looks so miserable just because it happens to be a cold day,' said Kate. 'It seems so effeminate to mind a little fresh air.'

'My dear, if you had to work hard through a very hot summer in Italy, do you not think you might look flushed and over-tired?'

'Ah, but to feel heat is quite a different thing!' protested Kate. 'There's nothing unmanly in that; why, don't you remember last August how limp and good-for-nothing Harry was in that very hot week?'

'Yes, because he was unused to it. You are illogical, Kate; it is not a bit more effeminate, as you say, to feel the physical effects of cold than of heat; the only difference is that you understand one feeling and don't understand the other.'

'That may be,' said Kate, 'but I don't like Signor Donati; and as to saying that he works hard, why, what man who is hard-worked would be sauntering down the High Street like that, with a child? I don't call his sort of profession work at all!'

In the meantime Carlo slowly made his way back to the hotel.

He was so tired and overdone that it was all he could do to bear Gigi's chatter. He wondered how he should get through with his 'Count Rodolpho,' remembered distastefully that he should have to make love to Mlle. de Caisne, who never would sink her own personality in that of 'Lisa,' and would have given all he possessed if any one had come to him with the news that

for some good reason there could be no opera that night. Everything in the future which he had to undertake looked to him like a huge mountain which he must perforce climb ; and, worst of all, he knew that the instant he faltered Comerio would come forward and offer to take his place. If it had not been for that thought he could have borne up better, but the consciousness that Gomez was carefully keeping watch on his health, like a vulture hovering over a dying man, and longing to swoop down on him,—this was almost maddening. He was troubled, too, about Sardoni, who, for the last day or two, had been unlike himself, moody and melancholy in the daytime, and wild and reckless towards night. He seemed to shun Carlo as much as possible, and when they were thrown together was so bitter and sarcastic that his friend could not imagine what had come over him ; it was so unreasonable, so altogether improbable, that the sermon of Sunday night should still be rankling in his mind, that such a notion never occurred to Carlo. He was altogether perplexed and felt very anxious about him, nor could he help perceiving with a pang that in the time of his own greatest need Sardoni had deserted him, wholly failing to notice his desperate struggle to keep up. How he got through his work he scarcely knew ; luckily for him, his throat was not much affected, though he was feeling far too weak and ill to be in good voice. At any rate, he did not break down, and he began to see that at present he must content himself with this poor comfort, and put up with cold receptions and the wretched consciousness of artistic failure. He went home wondering what poor old Piale would have said could he have heard him, and congratulating himself that the dear old Maestro was not likely even to see the unfavourable critiques on his singing which must inevitably follow upon so wretched a performance.

On the Wednesday morning, after a very restless night, he woke much worse than on the previous day, and feeling positively sick at the thought that he must either get through the trying part of 'Figaro' that night or confess his illness, get a medical certificate to prove his inability to appear, and thus give all into the hands of Gomez and Comerio. For he knew too well that no doctor in his senses would permit him to sing in his present state, that he would infallibly be ordered to rest ; and for this reason, while taking every possible precaution throughout the winter, he had avoided doctors as he would have avoided the plague. It was still just

possible that he might struggle on till the warm weather came, then, in June, Merlino might, and probably would, renew the contract with him, and he should go to America with the troupe and once more baffle Comerio. If he could only hold out!

He lay in bed as long as he dared, then, knowing that Gomez would publicly comment on the fact if he failed to make his appearance, and that Merlino invariably wanted him if he happened to be late in the morning, dressed hastily, noticed with relief that he did not look nearly so ghastly as he felt, and went down to the crowded coffee-room. The hotel was full of people who had come down to Ashborough for the races; they were a noisy, disreputable crew; and as Carlo entered the room where they were all breakfasting before going to the racecourse, it seemed to him like coming into a pandemonium. His head was aching miserably, but his ears seemed preternaturally alive to the slightest sound, and he could distinctly hear several comments on 'one of those operatic fellows' as he steered his way through the throng to the fireplace, nodding to Merlino and Tannini as he passed them.

'Good-day, Donati; how are you?' said a voice at his elbow.

He looked round and saw the Spaniard's malicious face.

'Good-morning,' he replied.

'How are you?' repeated Gomez.

'I'm cold,' said Carlo, drawing nearer to the fire, and determined that Gomez should gain nothing from his catechism. 'They don't know how to build up fires in this place.'

As he spoke he felt the Spaniard's searching glance, and knew that Gomez was far too shrewd not to find out the true state of the case. For although his rich, ruddy-brown colouring deceived many people, yet keen observers might easily note that day by day his cheeks grew more hollow, and that there were lines of pain about his mouth and eyes. There was to him a sort of horrible humiliation about it, for he had never been ill in all his life, had thought it impossible that his perfect health should be broken, had almost laughed when Captain Britton had suggested the idea to him. It was useless, however, to blink the fact any longer; and when the place was quiet once more—the noisy guests gone off to the races, and Merlino and Marioni to the theatre—Carlo gave way, shivering from head to foot almost like one in a fit of ague.



'Cold morning, sir,' said one of the over-worked waiters, putting fresh coals on the fire. 'Have you breakfasted, sir?'

'I won't take anything, thank you,' said Carlo, feeling not the slightest inclination for food.

'Some nice hot rashers, sir, or an egg?' suggested the waiter. But Carlo was not to be tempted.

'We shall have to put you on my "*Don't be dainty*,"' said Gigi, taking off his bib embroidered with this moral precept and trotting up to Carlo with it.

It was impossible not to laugh. The waiter smiled politely and withdrew, but returned before long with a cup of coffee.

'Try that, sir,' he said kindly; 'it's just fresh made and will do you good. You have a heavy cold coming on, sir.'

Carlo was touched by the man's courtesy, he did not deny the advent of the heavy cold.

'Gigi,' he said, 'I'm afraid we must give up going to Merlebank to lunch. You shall take a note over there, if I can find someone to send with you.'

'Are you ill, *zio caro*?' asked the child, frightened by the look of pain which he for the first time noticed in the face so familiar to him.

'The waiter says it's a heavy cold coming on, and anyhow I must save up for to-night. I'm sorry to disappoint you.'

'I wish we could go,' said Gigi, wistfully, 'but I more wish you wasn't ill;' and he raised his quaint, pitiful, little face to Carlo's with one of those childish caresses which made Carlo feel that everything he had been through was worth while.

He sat down to write to Clare, and Gigi ran back to his beloved soldiers, monotonously chanting, in his rather pretty little voice,—

"Pray, Mr. Frog, will you give us a song?  
But let it be something that's not very long."  
"Indeed, Mrs. Mouse," replied Mr. Frog,  
"A cold has made me as hoarse as a hog."

Carlo was fain to confess that day that it was a relief to get rid of his little companion. He sent him off to Merlebank with a friendly scene-shifter, and sat in a great arm-chair drawn close to the fire, bearing miserable headache and backache, yet finding a sort of relief in the consciousness that he could cough and shiver to his heart's content now that no one was near.

The morning passed in a strange quiet, like the pause before a storm; the very streets were deserted, for all Ashborough

was on the racecourse; Nita, who was not singing that evening, was still in her room; Mlle. de Caisne was closeted with her dressmaker; there was nothing to break the peace of Carlo's solitude, if indeed such feverish misery could be called peace.

The clock struck twelve, and he started from a troubled waking dream of Francesca to the recollection that in another eight hours he should have to transform himself somehow into Figaro; and with nervousness far greater than that which he had felt at his first appearance, he made his way to the private sitting-room which was the joint property of Merlino's Company, and began to practise. But five minutes completely exhausted him, he shut the piano, and in a sort of despair stretched himself at full length on the hearthrug.

'I don't know what is going to happen to me,' he thought to himself, with the misery of a thoroughly healthy man for the first time attacked by illness. 'But if I am to sing I can sing, that much is certain; I'll at least die in harness.'

Resolutely driving back the crowd of cares that surged in upon him, taking advantage of his physical weakness, he lay in a sort of enforced quiet,—the quiet which can only come to a good man well schooled in self-discipline. He was failing, and knew it all too well, but he knew still better that he was but a unit in the great army of One who cannot fail, knew that

'He  
Alone may say, "'Tis finished all and very good."  
We only do a part, and partly well,  
And others come and mend it.'

He must have dozed for a few minutes, for on suddenly opening his eyes he found that Nita had come into the room, and was looking down upon him with her beautiful, heartless face, and once again that look of suppressed excitement which had pained him so much at Birmingham.

'You are ill,' she said, breathlessly. 'You are not going to sing to-night?'

He was on his feet in a moment. 'Certainly I am going to sing,' he said. 'Marioni advised me not to go out this morning, to save up for the opera, as I have a cold coming on.'

'Where is Gigi?' she asked, with nervousness, which he hailed with relief. Since the child's narrow escape from death she had certainly learnt to think much more of him, and that she should trouble herself as to his safety was something quite new.

'Gigi has gone over to Merlebank with a note; I meant to have gone to see Miss Claremont, but thought it was wiser to

save up for Figaro. I sent him over with Adamson, he'll take great care of him.'

'But here is Adamson coming down the street alone. What can have happened to the child? Why did you send him?'

She refused to hear reason, but Carlo was only too glad to be scolded, for every word revealed to him how much she loved the child.

The discussion was soon ended by the arrival of the scenshifter, with a message to the effect that Master Gigi was staying to lunch at Merlebank, and that Miss Claremont would bring him back in the carriage that afternoon.

Nita was pacified, and asked Carlo to accompany her while she practised a new song; she seemed to forget her first impression on seeing him, got absorbed in the music, and thought no more of his possible illness and Comerio's possible advent. He was relieved, and presently went down to lunch with her, made a feint of eating something, and heard with satisfaction that a plan was proposed for hiring a brake and going on to the racecourse, since he knew that he should be left in peace most of the afternoon. But as the hours passed by he grew steadily worse, and not even the rest and solitude prepared him for the great effort of the evening. He was sitting crouched up by the fire, his head resting on his hands, when Domenica Borelli came into the room. She was tall and stately, with something both in her face and in her way of walking which revealed her character, a noble-minded, upright woman, whom to know was to revere. She was some years older than he was, and off the stage her face bore the stamp of its thirty years.

'I thought perhaps you would just go through "*Dunque io son*" with me,' she said, as she crossed the room; then as she drew nearer, and could see his face more clearly, 'but I'm afraid you are really ill, you don't look fit to be up.'

'I would rather not try the *duetto* now, if you don't mind,' he said. 'Don't say anything to the rest; I may be better to-morrow.'

'But you ought to see a doctor,' she said; 'you ought to have a rest, I am sure. Signor Merlino must find a substitute till you are fit to sing again, since Fasola is able to take so few of your parts.'

'It may come to that,' he said, with a sigh that was almost a groan. 'I wish I had a respectable under-study, who could at any rate do the work on occasion.'

Domenica Borelli had a woman's quick perception, she instantly understood the whole story, that story to which Merlino was deaf and blind, though it concerned him so nearly. For the first time she understood Carlo. Hitherto she had liked him as a fellow-artist, now she felt that she longed to be his friend.

'Is there anything I could do to help you?' she said, and there was something in her kind, quiet, unsentimental tone which conveyed to him perfectly the sense of that true friendship which, though many deny it, can most assuredly exist between man and woman.

In his great distress of mind and body her help was precisely what he needed.

'Indeed you can,' he said, with tears in his eyes. 'If at any time I should be obliged to leave the Company,—if I should fall ill,—will you be a friend to my sister and to Gigi?'

It was asking a hard thing of her, for she particularly disliked Anita, but, guessing his reason for asking her, she could not possibly have refused him.

'There is one other thing,' he continued; 'I am unhappy about Sardoni, he is in some trouble, I think. Be his friend, too, as you are mine.'

She coloured, not feeling at all sure that Sardoni was the sort of man with whom friendship would be possible.

'I don't understand Signor Sardoni,' she said, doubtfully.

'Nor I, just now, but he has been a good friend to me. I wish you would see a little more of him; you might be his good angel.'

She made no very definite promise, but something in her face satisfied Carlo.

'And you?' she said; 'you mean to go on singing——'

'Till I come to grief,—yes. I shall make you a miserable Figaro to-night, but perhaps you'll put up with me.'

There was something which touched her very deeply in his humility, for she knew how painful it must be to his artist nature to face the thought of attempting a part to which he could not possibly do justice.

'I shall have the satisfaction of acting with a brave man, at any rate,' she said. 'It needs no small courage to face an audience when you know you can't please them. Perhaps with rest, though, you may be feeling better; I shall not stay tiring you any longer.'

'You don't know how much good you have done me!' he said, gratefully, feeling that her promise in case of his illness had removed part of the burden from his mind.

She left him to prepare as best he might for the evening, and to count the quarters chimed by the clock in the Town Hall much as a prisoner might have counted them while waiting for the hour of execution. Sounds of bustle and confusion in the street warned him that the races must be over; he left the sitting-room, feeling quite unable to meet the scrutiny of Gomez, or to endure the talk of any of his *confrères*, and dragged himself up to No. 62; and here, after a while, Gigi found him.

'What! gone to bed so early, San Carlo!' he exclaimed, trotting up, with his merry little face, but growing grave and gentle as the truth began to dawn on his childish mind. 'Are you better now?' he asked, very anxiously.

'I am only resting. Don't look so frightened, *mio caro*.'

'They sent you some flowers,' said Gigi, putting a lovely bunch of snowdrops and aconites on the bed; 'and here is a letter too.'

Carlo tried to seem pleased, and to take an interest in the child's account of his day at Merlebank; then he opened Clare's letter. Mr. Britton would send the close carriage over for him in the morning, and hoped he would be well enough to come and say good-bye before leaving Ashborough to-morrow. The kind words cheered him, but he was much too ill to look so far ahead, and the words of an old eastern poem floated through his mind—

'To-morrow!—why, to-morrow I may be  
Myself with yesterday's seven thousand years.'

'You must go down to dinner, little one,' he said, after a silence, in which Gigi had sat watching him with big, solemn eyes. 'If any one asks why I don't come, say I have a bad headache, and shall rest till it is time to go to the theatre.'

The hours passed by and Gigi did not return. Carlo imagined that Domenica Borelli had kept him, and was grateful to her. The clock struck seven; he prayed in brief, disconnected sentences that he might be able to get through his work, that no evil might befall Anita, that he might judge rightly as to what could be done. Again, with a quickness which startled him, the quarter was chimed; he tried to think of Figaro, sang a snatch or two of 'Zitti, Zitti,' and felt that he would have given anything to be able to escape from that night's performance.

Should he even now follow Domenica's suggestion and send for a doctor? There was yet time. For an instant the thought of the intense relief to himself was almost more than he could

## A LAST STRUGGLE

withstand. But then, on the other hand, he argued, people who had never been ill were apt to think themselves dying when there was nothing serious the matter with them, and, if he gave up tamely now, Comerio would certainly put himself forward to fill the vacancy in the company. No; he must fight for his post to the last gasp. The half-hour struck as he formed his final resolution, and with an effort he flung back the rugs and coats which were heaped up on the bed, staggered to his feet, lit the gas, and, standing before the mirror, threw himself into one of Figaro's characteristic attitudes, and sang a bar or two of '*Largo al factotum*.'

'Passable, if I can only hold out,' he thought to himself. 'And, after all, I'm not the first man who has made merry, and sung, and paced the stage, with aching bones. Was it Grimaldi or Liston who made the people laugh till they cried while he was bearing torments?'

He made his way to the sitting-room and looked in to see if Sardoni was there, but heard that he had already started. Merlino joined him in a grumbling humour; Gigi trotted up to say good-night; and then, feeling like one in a bad dream, he found himself walking through the street among jostling passengers, and getting a sort of confused vision of the bad faces which always make their appearance in a town where races are being held. The distance between the Royal Hotel and the theatre was quite short, but it seemed to him that night almost endless; it was only by a great effort that he kept up with Merlino, and when he reached his dressing-room he felt as if he could not have stood another minute.

'You are ill, signore?' said Sebastiano, the dresser, with anxiety.

'It's all right, I will rest a minute,' he replied, breathlessly. 'Where is Signor Sardoni?'

'In the green-room, signore; he dressed earlier than usual. Let me call him.'

'No, no,' said Carlo, quickly. 'I am better alone.'

And so perhaps he was, yet Sardoni's defection pained him—his friend had studiously avoided him the whole day. The dresser proposed all sorts of remedies, and Carlo patiently endured the well-meaning chatter till he was thoroughly equipped in his Spanish costume and had been duly 'made up'; then he begged that no one might disturb him till the very last moment, and sat crouched up by the little fire, hearing in the distance the familiar sounds of the overture and the succeeding choruses. At last his hour came.

'Quite time, signore,' said Sebastiano, rapping on the door. He threw it open and walked slowly along the winding passages, arriving at the wings just in time to encounter the chorus as they came off the stage. Some rumour as to his illness had got abroad, and many good wishes and inquiries were made in the quick, silent Italian fashion from his friends among the chorus singers. With very few exceptions he was extremely popular in the Company, and much sympathy was felt for him when it became apparent that he was far more fit to be in bed than at the theatre. An attendant handed him a guitar, he heard the orchestra begin the introduction to his song, and his thoughts flew back from this miserable present to the sunny past. He remembered how on his last day of unalloyed happiness he had sung this very song in Piale's room in the Strada Mont' Oliveto, and how the old Maestro had been in despair over his refusal to go on the stage.

'Thank Heaven he is not here to-night to be tortured by my bad performance!' was his last reflection as he drew himself together and walked on to the stage. The house was full, but by this time he had become rather discerning in the matter of audiences, and perceived at once that it had a larger proportion than on the previous night of the rowdy element, introduced into Ashborough by the races. He hardly knew whether to be relieved or vexed at seeing Mr. Britton and his son in the stalls, and, indeed, was able to spare little time to think of them, since he had to devote all his powers to conquering the agony of nervousness which had overwhelmed him. In vain he struggled to feel himself Figaro, his head swam, every bone in his body seemed to assert itself aching as though protesting that it belonged to one, Donati, who ought to have been in his bed at that moment, and not at all to the blithe, merry barber of Seville.

'Courage!' he said to himself. 'If I can't get into my character I'll at least walk through the part like a man, for Nita's sake!'

He set to work manfully, fully conscious that the conductor was eyeing him with fear and trembling, and anticipating some dire mishap. Still he struggled on, exerting himself to the utmost and trying to disregard the evident symptoms of disappointment which began to be manifest in the audience. He would not be influenced by them, though he was too keenly sensitive not to perceive the sort of wave of impatience and disapproval which passed over the faces of the listening crowd. Endless seemed the song! At each brief interval it seemed to

him more impossible that he should ever get through it safely, and the mockery of the oft-repeated words, '*Ah ! che bel vivere, che bel piacere !*' made matters still worse. At length the end drew near ; with relief at the prospect, and with a desperate effort, he dashed off into the final and more florid repetitions of '*Ah, bravo Figaro !*' not without, even at that moment, a humorous perception of the effect such words from such a singer must produce on the hearers. 'Were I there instead of here I should laugh till I cried,' he reflected.

But it was almost over ; he had survived the last long florid passage ; there remained only four more notes. Exhausted, strung up to the very highest pitch of endurance, he tried to take the quick breath which was indispensable at that moment, but to draw it seemed impossible. He felt a sharp stab of pain as though a knife had been suddenly plunged in his side, yet the fatal white stick in Marioni's hand was raised, and with a last effort he forced himself to attack the high G.

What followed was to him ever after a sort of nightmare recollection. His voice failed utterly, and the high note, which should have been the climax of the song, broke into a discordant sound that only ceased to ring in his ears when overpowered by a storm of hissing. Such a hopeless failure was too much even for the patience and kindness of an English audience ; hisses resounded on all sides. It was intolerable to have paid money to listen to such a miserable performance. The people were really angry, and would not be pacified.

For a moment or two Carlo stood looking at the angry, contemptuous faces with a sore-hearted sense of rejection and a keen, personal pain ; then, seeing that they would no longer tolerate his presence he turned and walked away, but had only gone a few steps when a sudden remembrance that this defeat meant Comerio's probable triumph all at once overpowered him. The brightly-lighted stage became black as night, the hisses were drowned by a rushing sound in his ears, and he fell back in a dead faint.

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## CHAPTER XXVI

## BEHIND THE SCENES

'When fog and failure o'er my being brood,  
 When life looks but a glimmering, marshy clod,  
 No fire out-flashing from the living God—  
 Then, then, to rest in faith were worthy victory !'

GEORGE MACDONALD.

SARDONI and Gomez, the Almaviva and Fiorello of the evening, were close at hand ; Fiorello's part was practically over, but he had lingered near to see how Donati would get on ; when he saw him hissed off the stage a quiet smile stole over his dark features, but when he saw him fall back fainting he rubbed his hands with satisfaction, lingered but a moment to assure himself that the baritone lay motionless on the boards with his guitar beside him, then rushed as fast as he could to his dressing-room, flung on a thick brown ulster, caught up his hat, and hurried out of the theatre. Just outside the stage door he encountered Mr. Britton.

Now Mr. Britton was one of those kindly-looking, courteous men who are constantly stopped by passers-by in the street who have lost their way or who need any kind of help ; Gomez instinctively turned to the pleasant-looking stranger.

'Pardon me, sir, but can you kindly tell me whether it is too late to send a telegram from the post-office?' he asked breathlessly.

'Oh no, you will find it open,' said Mr. Britton, looking at him keenly.

Gomez thanked him, and ran at full speed down the narrow side street, and two minutes later he might have been seen standing at one of the little screened desks in the post-office, writing the following message in Italian :—

'Valentino ill ; was hissed off stage to-night after "*Largo al factotum*." Get paragraph put in one of London papers. See it to-morrow, and telegraph promptly to M., offering your services.'

Meantime, Sardoni, far too much startled and shocked to pay the slightest attention to Gomez, rushed forward to his friend's help, flung the guitar out of the way, and raising Carlo's head, looked anxiously at his motionless features and pale lips, bitterly reproaching himself with the absorption in

his own affairs which had made him blind to all else. Some sense of the contrast between that still form and the noisy confusion in the theatre first reminded him that the curious audience were watching this unexpected scene in the opera with eager eyes, and that, although the hisses had changed into a babel of question and surmise, Carlo was still exposed to every sort of ruthless criticism.

'Tell those idiots to let down the curtain,' he said, impatiently, as Marioni came hurrying forward, with his pale face and his bushy hair, looking more distraught than usual. The little conductor had flung down his baton and rushed from the orchestra the instant Carlo had fallen, but he was too excitable to think, as Sardoni thought, of practical matters. And yet it was a relief to him to be told to do something; he rushed away to give the order, and the next minute the curtain descended, veiling from the audience the crowd of actors and attendants which had gathered round poor Figaro. Mr. Britton, who had been admitted at the stage door, was just in time to see Carlo borne into the green-room, and to follow with those who came after; he had heard so much of theatrical jealousies and quarrels, and had formed so low an opinion of theatrical people, that he was surprised to see the real sympathy and concern shown by every creature present.

'He has been ill this long time,' said old Bauer; 'but he had too much spirit to give in. Poor lad! those brutes ought to have seen how it was with him.'

'Thought more of the bad bargain they had made than of the singer's feelings,' said Tannini, with his Yankee twang. 'Well, 'tis the way of the world.'

'Are you the doctor, sir?' asked Domenica Borelli, noticing Mr. Britton for the first time.

'No, I am a friend of Signor Donati,' he replied, glad to get speech of her, for he had noticed her quiet, womanly way of helping Sardoni and Merlino to do all that could be done for Carlo. 'Shall I go and fetch a doctor?'

'I think it would be well——,' she began. 'But, stay, he is coming to himself; perhaps there is no need, and I know he would dislike having one called in.'

'It's something new for everyone to be waiting on Valentino,' said old Bauer. 'A reversal of the usual order.'

'Yes,' said Mlle. Duroc; 'he was the factotum of the troupe as well as of the opera. But, see, he is reviving.'

And now Mr. Britton observed a marked, but perhaps not wholly unnatural change in Merlino. While his brother-in-law

had remained unconscious he had been as kindly and solicitous as any man could possibly be, but the moment Carlo came to himself, Merlino, relieved from the anxiety, remembered that as *Impresario* he was left in an awkward predicament.

Carlo opened his eyes for a moment, caught a confused vision of the faces round him, then closed them again for very weariness, and began to wonder, in a dreamy, but troubled way, where on earth he could be. He heard Merlino swearing and raving, and Tannini, and Bauer, and the local manager, and Marioni, all talking at once.

'*Santo Diavolo!*' cried Merlino. 'Was ever *Impresario* worse treated? Here is the best house we have had for months, and what can I do but give back the money? There is no going on without a *Figaro!*'

'Had Donati told you this morning that he was ill you would have had time to telegraph for Comerio, who no doubt would be willing to help you in such an emergency,' remarked Gomez, who had glided into the room.

Mr. Britton glanced sharply round at him, instantly recognising his face, though he was now once more in his *Fiorello* costume. He perceived at once that the man was no friend to Carlo, and wondered why he had rushed to the telegraph office.

'*Accidente!* why did you not do so?' said Merlino, turning upon his brother-in-law with a wrathful gesture. 'I ask you now what am I to do? Is all this money to be lost?'

'You might telegraph to Comerio now and secure him for to-morrow, at any rate,' suggested Gomez. 'He could join us at Queenbury and take——'

'No such thing,' interrupted Carlo, snatching at Sardoni's arm, and dragging himself up. 'Give *Fra Diavolo* to-morrow, and that will give me a day's rest; and go quickly and say to the audience that I am unwell, but that, since the opera can't be continued without the leading part, I will do the best I can, if they'll put up with me.'

There was a vigour and force in his tone which astonished everyone; Merlino, with a look of relief, hurried away to pacify the audience; and, though the others had serious doubts whether Donati could possibly get through so trying a part, they would not side with Gomez, who began to remonstrate with him.

'I never saw anyone more afraid of being supplanted,' said the Spaniard, vindictively. 'For my part, I call it mere obstinacy and conceit to attempt what is clearly impossible for you to do.'

'I calculate it doesn't much affect you, my friend,' said Tanini, drily. 'Your part is over for to-night, so just shut up, will you? If the rest of us who have to sing with Donati make no bones about it, why should you take upon yourself to grumble?'

Gomez turned away with a muttered curse, and Carlo looked gratefully at the American.

'I'll do my best not to put you out; I shall be glad for Merlino's sake and my own too if you and the audience will tolerate such a bad Figaro. Come to my room with me, will you, Jack?' then as he caught sight of Mr. Britton, and received a hearty grip of the hand, 'How good of you to come round! I had no idea you were here. I was so ashamed to give you such a miserable rendering of that song.'

Mr. Britton was not sorry to leave the green-room and to go with Carlo and Sardoni into one of the little dressing-rooms. There were not many chairs to be had, and Carlo, without ceremony, dropped into the one drawn close to the tiny fireplace, unable to hide any longer the severe pain he was suffering, though when questioned he made light of it.

'You surely ought not to sing,' said Mr. Britton.

'It won't do my voice any harm if I can only get breath enough,' he replied. 'And the pain isn't continuous, only just a sharp stab in the side every now and then.'

'Dear old fellow, it was madness of you to come at all,' said Sardoni. 'You must give in; you must put up with Comerio's return; there is no help for it.'

Carlo leant his head on his hand and was silent, as if struggling with himself; both speakers seemed to have forgotten Mr. Britton's presence.

'It's no good looking ahead,' said Carlo, after a pause. 'Of course it will be all right. But don't argue now, Jack; I've got to sing if they will have me, and there's an end of it.'

As he spoke there was a knock at the door, and Merlino entered.

'I think they will hear you,' he said. 'They are in a bad temper, but they see we are doing all that can be done, and they'll hardly hiss you off again. They are very easily pacified, these English audiences.'

Carlo glanced at Mr. Britton with the strangest mixture of pain and laughter in his dark, shining eyes. The contented look of the Impresario as he painted the sort of reception which probably awaited him tickled his fancy.

'A glass of porter before you go on?' said Bauer, pressing it upon him.

'Try this raw egg, signore,' said his dresser, eagerly.

'Or a troche,' suggested Sardoni.

'Or a Stolberg,' said Merlino, producing a little box full of dark-looking lozenges.

With a smile and a gesture he thanked them, and made everyone laugh by quoting Figaro's words, '*Oh, che vita! che vita! oh, che mestiere!*'

'Was there ever such a fellow?' said Bauer. 'I verily believe he would make us laugh if he were on his death-bed.'

'If the audience do but realise his courage he will be well received,' said Mr. Britton, who was standing at the wings beside the old German singer. 'There is nothing that pleases the British public like pluck.'

In truth, to face again the audience which had so lately refused to hear him was no very pleasant task to Carlo, but then he had a habit of grasping the nettles of life which stood him in good stead. More sensitive than most men, he had turned his weakness into strength by resolutely refusing to make the smallest concession to it, and he was able even with overwrought nerves and failing physical powers to endure with composure the trying ordeal. It was as Merlino had said, the audience kindly consented to put up with him; they allowed him to appear without a single hiss. Indeed, the chilling silence was broken by five or six resounding claps from the third row of stalls.

'That is Francesca's cousin,' he thought to himself, and he felt glad to have one friendly face among the hundreds of coldly critical ones. He was glad, too, to have such friends as Domenica Borelli and Sardoni to sing with that night, and was cheered by Mr. Britton's kindness. If only he could get through his work he thought that, spite of the dark future, he should feel perfectly happy. But that was the great question. All thought he had attempted what was physically impossible, and he shrank in horror from making another exhibition of himself on the stage. 'If I do faint again,' he reflected, 'I hope I shall do it decently in my dressing-room.'

By sheer force of will he got through the long weary duet with Sardoni, but it left him so worn out with pain that he could hardly stand. He got off the stage somehow, and the moment they were out of sight Sardoni took him by the arm and half dragged him to his room, where, with an irrepressible groan, he threw himself on the floor beside the fire, seeming to find a sort of relief in thrusting the guitar under his arm so that he actually lay upon it.

'Pleurisy,' thought Mr. Britton, who had followed to see if he could be of any use; but Carlo was evidently in such pain that he did not like to talk to him, so he turned instead to Sardoni, to whom he had taken a great fancy, and who, to make up for his past selfishness, was devoting himself to his friend in a way that pleased the Englishman. They discussed all possible means of helping him, and Sardoni going out to fetch some restorative brought back word that Mlle. Borelli had been encored in her cavatina, which would give Carlo a little longer space to recover his strength.

'Are you sure I am not in your way here?' asked Mr. Britton. 'I don't feel as if I could sit in the audience not knowing how our friend is getting on.'

Sardoni, who realised that the stranger must be some relation to Francesca Britton, warmly assured him that he was the greatest possible help; and Carlo, though too much exhausted to speak an unnecessary word, gave him a glance which conveyed more than many sentences.

All too soon came the unwelcome call-boy. Again Carlo braced himself up for the effort, and Sardoni and Mr. Britton watched him anxiously through his scene with Rosina.

'He is on the stage a great deal after this,' explained Sardoni, 'but the most trying part is over for him as far as singing goes when he is once through this scene.'

'Will he get through, do you think?'

'If he does it will be by the skin of his teeth,' said Sardoni. 'But, like the *Barbiere* himself, he is a "*Bravo giovanotto*." No other man whom I know would do it, but he perhaps may.'

'Ah, I thought so!' he exclaimed, as, the duet over, the baritone beat a hasty retreat, and on reaching the shelter of the wings would have fallen had he not promptly caught him. 'It is as I said, by the skin of his teeth.'

They carried him back to his room, but had barely restored him to life when Sardoni was obliged to go on the stage again, leaving him alone with Mr. Britton.

It was the strangest evening the Englishman had ever spent, as he sat in the dismal little dressing-room, with its bare floor and whitewashed walls, its confusion of stage dresses and the garments of prosaic life. Some one had brought in two or three cushions from the green-room, and as soon as Carlo had recovered his senses they had laid him on these upon his left side, the position which seemed to give him the greatest ease. The firelight played on his face, and Mr. Britton, as he watched him, found his thoughts wandering back to the time when he

had first met him with Francesca outside the English church at Naples. He recalled the strange, sad smile which had passed over the young Italian's face when he congratulated him on his betrothal, and he felt irresistibly drawn to a man who could deliberately choose a career so self-denyng, so little likely to be understood.

He was startled to find that his thoughts of Francesca must have affected his companion.

'We may not be alone again,' said Carlo, turning his face towards him. 'If anything should happen to me, will you promise to give this to Francesca'—he indicated their betrothal ring—'and tell her how good everyone was to me?'

Mr. Britton felt a choking sensation in his throat, but he promised, and then, partly to break the uncomfortable silence, remarked that he had heard from Casa Bella that morning.

'They are well?' asked Carlo.

'Quite well. Francesca comes to England in June.'

The next moment he regretted his words, for they seemed to give the finishing touch to Carlo's suffering. He turned abruptly away, and, though his face was hidden, Mr. Britton could see that he was struggling to suppress a tempest of passionate emotion. So little do people understand each other, that it had never occurred to the Englishman, with all his kindheartedness, to picture to himself the torture of a lover who knows that his love will be close at hand, yet that he is to be denied even a sight of her. But that silent, bitter struggle taught him much, and once more set his kind heart to weave plans for helping the course of true love to run smooth.

Before anything more had passed, the call-boy rapped at the door, and Mr. Britton in dismay turned to see what his companion would do. He had yet to learn that Italian storms, if violent, are brief, and that an Italian nature, if it has strong emotions, has also a wonderful self-mastery upon which it can fall back in time of need. Carlo rose promptly, rearranged his disordered costume in a business-like fashion, and smoothed his hair; then, fearing that Mr. Britton might regret the words which had escaped him, said in the manner which won him so many friends, 'Do you mind coming with me to the wings? I like to feel that you are there.'

And before the Englishman had recovered from his surprise at this unlooked-for composure, Figaro was in the thick of the noisy group on the stage, acting better than he had done all the evening, and endeavouring to play the part of peacemaker, and to put an end to the altercation.

Mr. Britton could hardly believe as he watched the lithe, active figure, now here, now there, that a few minutes ago he had seen the same man lying in the extremity of mental and bodily pain; and when once more in the interval between the acts he and Sardoni had to restore the Italian to his senses, he could no longer keep his astonishment to himself.

'What in the world can our friend be made of?' he exclaimed. 'I should not have thought it possible for a man of his temperament to persevere in the teeth of such difficulties.'

'I suppose pluck and goodness generally do go together,' said Sardoni; 'and though you may be Donati's friend, no one who is not in this Company can have much idea of what he really is. He's out and out the best fellow I ever came across.'

'He seems very much liked by most of the Company.'

'Yes, and with good reason. They all apply to him one of their expressive Italian sayings—"Good as a piece of bread"—a description which would not hold for the rest of us.'

'He is coming to himself,' said Mr. Britton, and there was silence in the room, broken at last by Carlo's voice.

'How much more, Jack?' he asked, faintly.

'The second act,' said Sardoni; 'three more scenes for you.'

He closed his eyes again, and they noticed that as the evening advanced he became less and less willing to speak an unnecessary word.

The opera, which had seemed to all the singers interminable, did at length end, and with it the last remains of Carlo's strength. More dead than alive he was carried to Mr. Britton's brougham, which had been ordered round to the stage door, and leaving the kindly Englishman to see him safely home, Sardoni hurried off in search of a doctor.

Carlo had fancied that if only he could get through the opera he should be perfectly happy, but when his work was really done he was suffering too acutely to be able to bestow a thought on the future or on Anita. Too faint to speak, he allowed Mr. Britton to help him up to his room, never troubling himself to consider the impression that No. 62 would make on the rich ship-builder. The miserable little place was to him now a haven of rest, and there was deep relief in the consciousness that he could now suffer in peace, that no call-boy would rap at this door, that there was no longer the horrible necessity of acting and singing before a critical audience. But to Mr. Britton that dismal little attic was the climax of the evening. Its total lack of comfort appalled him, and when he had left



the patient to the care of Sardonì and the doctor he drove home, vowing that Carlo should be moved to Merlebank the very next day.

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## CHAPTER XXVII

## 'HIGH FAILURE'

'We are like soldiers in a vast, widely-extended battlefield (wrapped in obscurity), of which we know not the phases, of which we seem utterly powerless to control the issues; but we are responsible for our own part—whatever goes on elsewhere, let us not fail in that. The changes of the world, which men think they are bringing about, are in the hands of God. With Him, when we have done our duty, let us leave them.'

DEAN CHURCH.

CLARE was much concerned when she heard the bad news which Mr. Britton and Harry brought home that evening.

'You didn't wait to hear the doctor's verdict?' she asked, when the bare outline of the story had been given her.

'No, it was so late, and I thought I should only have been in the way; but I fear there's not the least doubt the poor fellow is in for pleurisy.'

'It was awful to see him towards the end,' said Harry. 'Leaning up against the woodwork when he had to be on the stage with nothing actually to sing or do, and every now and then, when he was singing, suddenly folding his arms—so—as if the pain was almost unbearable.'

'What do you think, Miss Claremont—if we had one of the St. John's nurses down, could we manage to look after him all right here?' said Mr. Britton.

Clare was delighted at the proposal, for she had always been fond of Carlo. She did not understand all Mr. Britton's reasons for taking an interest in the young Italian, but his kindness and hospitality did not at all surprise her, because he was a man who was for ever going out of his way to help other people, and Kate, who was housekeeper, used sometimes to protest that really Merlebank might as well call itself what it was in fact—a sanatorium for his friends and acquaintances.

'There is no doubt he must be moved from his present quarters,' said Mr. Britton. 'I never saw such a room,—the little child sleeping in a portmanteau, a miserable truckle-

bed, a sloping skylight through which you could see the stars—such a room as no servant of mine should sleep in.'

So the plans for Carlo's reception at Merlebank were discussed, and the next morning Mr. Britton drove in to the Royal Hotel to see what sort of a night the Italian had passed. At the entrance he encountered the doctor.

'How is your patient to-day, Kavanagh?' he asked.

'Very bad, poor fellow,—must be moved at once to the hospital.'

'Nonsense, he is a friend of mine; I want him brought to Merlebank. You'll give leave for that, I hope?'

'Oh, certainly, if you really want to have him, but I must warn you that he is likely to be laid up for some time,—acute pleurisy, and we shall do well if we ward off complications.'

'Poor fellow! I thought he was in for it last night. He is an old family friend of ours, and I shall be particularly glad to help him if I can. How about a nurse? Shall I telegraph for one?'

'I can see to that, if you like,' said the doctor. 'His sister seems a most empty-headed creature, and the sooner he is away from her the better.'

Mr. Britton was just wondering whether he had better ask to see Sardoni, when he caught sight of Gigi strolling listlessly down the passage.

'How is your uncle, little man?' he asked. 'Can I see him?'

'He's ill,' said Gigi, mournfully, and without further remark he slipped his little brown hand into Mr. Britton's, and led the way to No. 62. The door was open, and a babel of Italian could be heard—four people all talking at once.

Mr. Britton half hesitated, but the child led him on. The next moment a curious scene met his gaze. In the dismal little attic, which by daylight looked even more forlorn and comfortless, a stormy discussion was being carried on. The Impresario, who was evidently in the worst of tempers, held in his hand an open telegram; Gomez, with a sarcastic smile on his usually grave face, stood playing the part of general irritant *con amore*; Madame Merlino and Sardoni seemed to be having a battle-royal; and the sick man lay in the midst of the strife of tongues evidently in great pain, but listening with strained anxiety to all that passed. Mr. Britton heard an impatient 'Can't you see how bad this is for him?' from Sardoni, and disconnected remarks about 'Comerio's coming,' which gave him the clue to the matter which was being discussed.

He waited at the door, for Donati was far too much absorbed in what was going on to notice him, and indeed had to concentrate all his faculties on the effort to meet this crisis. That which he had feared had come to pass: Comerio had telegraphed to offer his services; and all through the weary night Carlo had been trying to solve the difficult problem whether, should this happen, it was his duty to explain all to Merlino or not. Superficial people are fond of saying that the right is always clear. Carlo did not find it so. It was only after hours of mental struggle and suffering that he at length arrived at the conclusion that, all things considered, he was not justified in arousing Merlino's suspicion. He went so far, however, as to propose another alternative.

'Look,' he said, speaking with difficulty, 'Paul Cremer's English Opera Company might very possibly have a spare baritone. Telegraph and see, and I will defray the expenses of anyone they can send.'

He broke off to cough—the effort had cost him hideous pain, and Mr. Britton could see that great drops of perspiration stood on his brow.

'*Accidente!* It only shows how little you know of such things,' said Merlino, angrily. 'We are secure of Comerio, and had far better have him than some stranger. I should have thought you were above such petty jealousy as that, Donati.'

'Then will you reply to the telegram?' asked Gomez.

'I suppose I must,' said Merlino, in his grumbling way. 'It's a confounded nuisance.'

And with muttered imprecations he left the room, evidently regarding Carlo's illness as a wilful injury and a personal insult.

Gomez having gained his object, followed the Impresario, and Mr. Britton drew near to the bed, and spoke to Sardoni, but Carlo lay with closed eyes, and took no notice of what was passing until he heard Nita get up from her chair beside him, and move towards the door. Then he started up with sudden energy.

'Nita,' he exclaimed, 'do not go yet—I want to speak to you!'

She turned back reluctantly, and at the same moment he became aware of Mr. Britton's presence.

'How kind of you to come!' he said. 'Will you excuse me just for a minute?—I want to speak to my sister—there is not much time left.'

'We will wait in the next room,' said Sardoni, 'if Madame Merlino will tell us when she leaves you.'

Nita assented, and, still reluctantly, sat down again beside the bed. When they were alone, he turned towards her.

'I had hoped to tide over this time in England,' he said, striving with all his might not to let the physical pain overmaster him. 'It is hard to feel that, after all, I have perhaps only made your danger greater. You must forgive me for failing you like this, Nita!'

'Don't distress yourself—I know of no danger!' she replied, crushingly, and with an expressive motion of her small, shapely head. There had been a time when she had told him a very different story, but he bore the set-down patiently and caught at the ray of hope.

'That is, indeed, true? Then God be thanked! I can go content!'

She laughed—the most heartless little laugh conceivable.

'Perhaps we do not mean precisely the same thing by the word "danger." There is no danger that my husband will ill-treat me, because one who loves me better will be here as my protector.'

'Nita!' he groaned.

'Now, listen to common-sense!' she said, with angry gestulation. 'Merlino and I are not happy together: Comerio and his wife are not happy together. Why are four people to live in misery because of a conventional law?'

'Because they have vowed to be true to each other through everything,—because the only hope of their leading pure, noble lives is destroyed when they shirk their duty, and give up trying to love each other,—because it is not a conventional law, but God's command!'

She laughed again.

'Bravo!' she exclaimed. 'My Confessor himself could not have read me a more correct little homily. As far as the marriage laws are concerned, *mio caro*, you are quite curiously orthodox. As a matter of fact, though, I always find these little homilies are propounded by the unmarried. Strange, isn't it?'

'You'll break my heart if you talk like that!' he exclaimed.

'Nonsense! Hearts don't break so easily, I assure you. You will go back to Francesca Britton and be happy; Comerio and I, too, shall be happy; while as for Merlino, he will merely lose a valuable soprano and baritone whom he never deserved.'

She had rattled on, paying no attention whatever to his suffering. He was now so much exhausted that it was physically impossible for him to speak more than two words.

'Our mother!' he faltered.

'Is in Paradise, and will be ready to pray for me when I am in purgatory!'

His next words were hardly audible.

'*Il Cristo!*' he gasped.

'My Confessor does not allow me to talk of religion with heretics,' she replied, triumphantly.

He turned away, and lay so absolutely still that Nita became frightened; however, it was an excellent opportunity to escape, and she availed herself of it, glancing in for a moment at the next room where Sardoni and Mr. Britton had waited.

'He has done with me now,' she said cheerfully, though all the time her conscience was pricking her.

Mr. Britton had seldom seen so pretty a woman for whom it was so difficult to get up any sort of regard. Without knowing why, he heartily disliked Nita.

'She does not seem particularly anxious about her brother,' he remarked.

Sardoni gnashed his teeth.

'He has given up everything to help her, and she—little vixen—won't do the slightest thing to please him. Let us come back to him.'

Mr. Britton was horrified to see the change that had come over Carlo. It was not merely that the bodily pain seemed to have increased so much, but that he was in such terrible distress. Sardoni, however, seemed to understand all, and Mr. Britton walked to the window and left the two friends together, though he could not avoid hearing, every now and then, a sentence or two.

'Failed—hopelessly!' were the only words that escaped Carlo, and Sardoni seemed to be cheering him, and denying that all was lost, promising his help, talking of letters, and speaking hopefully of the future. Some mention of the hospital brought Mr. Britton to the bedside.

'The doctor says you may be nursed at my house,' he said, kindly. 'I couldn't think of allowing you to go to the hospital, —Miss Claremont is longing to have you at Merlebank.' And then, to silence the Italian's thanks, and doubts, and evident wavering, he bent down and whispered a few words in his ear: 'For Francesca's sake you must not refuse me.'

They were interrupted by a suppressed sobbing from the other side of the bed, and found that Gigi was sitting in a disconsolate little heap on the floor, crying as though his heart would break.

'Put him up here, Jack, by me,' said Carlo. 'What is it, Gigi? are you hurt?'

'Oh, don't go away from me!' sobbed the child. 'Don't leave me so all alone.'

'Let him come to Merlebank, too,' said Mr. Britton, who was apt to make kind-hearted offers without at all consulting Kate or the household arrangements.

'You are very good, but he ought to be with his mother,' said Carlo, after a minute's thought. It cost him much to send away the little fellow, but he knew that Anita had really begun to care for him, and hoped that the child might prove her greatest safeguard. Mr. Britton guessed as much, but of course there could be no explanation to Gigi himself, to whom the refusal must have seemed barbarous. He sobbed pitifully.

'Look, *mio caro*, I love you dearly, and would like you to have this time in the country,' said Carlo, drawing the child close to him; 'but in some ways it is better not. Say, do you, too, love me a little bit?'

'Yes, yes,' sobbed Gigi, clinging to him.

'Then, will you stay here to please me, and help the mother, and run errands for them all when you can, and write me long letters——' He broke off, unable to say another word.

'*Carino!*' said the child, with a depth of love and tenderness in his tone. Then, as Sardoni told him how ill Carlo was, 'I will be good—good,' and choking back his tears he slid down from the bed and sat like a sorrowful little statue on the edge of his portmanteau.

Mr. Britton, anxious that no more time should be lost, hurried to his office to telephone to Merlebank for the landau, and in an hour's time he was back again to help in all the arrangements.

The patient seemed a little easier, both in mind and body, though apparently no one but Sardoni had seen him, and there was no change as to his substitute.

At the last moment Madame Merlino came to say good-bye to him, expressing very prettily her thanks to Mr. Britton for saving her brother from the hospital; but she seemed particularly anxious not to be left alone with the invalid, and apparently no words passed between them. When they parted, however, he drew her face down to his and gave her a lingering kiss, and Mr. Britton noticed that as she raised her head her eyes were full of tears. What was the meaning of it all, he wondered? Had she, after all, a heart? Did Carlo's silence

appeal to her when his words had failed? or was it that his manner had somehow conveyed a confidence and trust in her higher nature which had wakened it from long sleep?

There was not much time for reflection, for just then the doctor arrived to superintend the removal of the patient, and before long Mr. Britton had taken leave of the various members of Merlino's Company who had become known to him during this little episode, and was driving home with his new guest.

People seem to have a notion that to be ill means to be more or less free from temptation; that with physical weakness comes spiritual strength; and that if the sick are in some ways to be pitied, they are in other respects to be very much envied. As a matter of fact, however, this idea is cruelly false. No healthy-minded, active man ever found it easy to be laid aside—ever submitted without a fierce struggle to the humiliation of dependence and bodily weakness. Far from necessarily becoming saints during illness, the bravest and best of men often find it as much as they can do to be even decently patient, and know only too well the mental misery of the time—

‘When the sensuous frame  
Is rack'd with pangs that conquer trust.’

The faith which had come to Carlo's help when he parted with Anita was not proof against the severe physical strain of the removal to Merlebank; his mind seemed incapable of hope, capable only of dwelling on the one horrible fear that Comerio's evil influence would prevail. Sleepless nights, and wearing anxiety, and severe bodily pain had made it almost impossible for him to see things in due proportion, and his artistic power of calling up before him graphic pictures of any subject that arrested his attention, became a torture almost unendurable.

The doctor and kind-hearted Mr. Britton had no idea of what was passing in the sick man's mind as they drove along the road between Ashborough and Merlebank, and when once he opened his eyes for a minute and they could not help seeing the look of grievous distress in them, they only thought of the bodily suffering, and said to him reassuringly, ‘It will soon be over.’ He could have smiled at the incongruity of the words had he not been down in the black depths where smiles can by no means come.

The carriage rumbled along with a dull, hollow, monotonous sound, and presently drew up at the great door at Merlebank; he caught a vision of Clare standing in the porch with two

or three servants, but it was far less distinct than the mental picture from which he could not escape. Then the doctor half smothered him with wraps, and since to breathe was agony, he found himself resenting almost childishly the infliction of great shawls, which necessitated two breaths where one might have sufficed. Was he losing his self-control, he wondered? It was clearly impossible for him to govern his thoughts,—was it also impossible to regulate his feelings? He prayed in a sort of blind, wretched despair; but in that state of blank depression nothing in heaven or earth seemed real to him but his own failure and that indelible mind-picture of Nita and Comerio. Dimly he felt his misery increased by the beauty and luxury of the room to which he was borne, and even by the kindness of his attendants. What did he in his misery want with outer comfort? 'I have miserably failed,' he thought to himself; 'and now, I suppose, am going to die. I wish they had let me die in the hotel room! I wish they would let me alone!'

To turn from this haunting picture was now an effort to which he was wholly unequal; it exercised a deadly fascination over him, and when Clare spoke to him he grudged the interruption. Everyone seemed intent on relieving his physical pain; and it was not that which absorbed him: it was the far worse mental torture caused in great measure by the bodily suffering,—the torture of the conviction that all his efforts had been vain, and that evil would triumph. Without one ray of comfort he tossed through that weary day and night; sleep was out of the question, he became less and less capable of thinking rationally, and the doctor, on visiting him the next morning, looked very grave. Clare and Mr. Britton waited anxiously for his verdict.

'There is evidently something weighing on his mind,' said Mr. Kavanagh, as he walked downstairs. 'The local symptoms are subsiding, but I fear he is in a critical state. These southern temperaments are always hard to deal with—it is touch and go with them. Keep him as quiet as possible, and I will look in again this evening.'

Clare felt sad at heart as she kept watch while the nurse rested after her night's work; she could guess pretty accurately what it was that was weighing upon Carlo's mind, but how to comfort him she did not know. He lay quite still with closed eyes, his lips just parted that he might breathe with less effort; but the hand which lay outside the bed-clothes was tightly clenched, and the face bore an expression of silent misery, which was almost more than Clare could endure.



'Is the pain still so bad?' she asked at length.

He opened his eyes; they were so hopeless, so full of dumb distress, that it seemed to her they must be the eyes of some other man. She could not have believed that Carlo could ever have gone down to such depths of wretchedness.

'Much better, thank you,' he answered, just above his breath; and Clare was thankful that his eyelids fell once more, for she could not keep back her tears. And so the hours passed on, and she knew that she was close to a man who was passing through the worst suffering that can be borne, and yet felt as powerless to reach him as if he had been a thousand miles away. At last, early in the afternoon, he seemed to make an effort to break the rigid quiet in which he had so long lain. She stood up to arrange his pillows afresh, and he took her hand in his and held it fast in a fevered grasp.

'If I could only sleep, Clare! if I could only sleep!' he exclaimed. They were the first words he had voluntarily spoken, and she took them as a good sign; clearly he began to see that he must do all that he could to free himself from absorption in this one painful idea; even in his illness the duty of self-mastery lingered vaguely with him, spite of his failing powers.

'There is one sovereign remedy for sleeplessness,' said Clare. 'Let us see whether it will have any effect upon you;' and taking a Bible from the shelf she began to read in a low, soft, slightly monotonous voice from the Book of Job. Whether it was the musical rhythm of the words, or the continuous sound, or the graphic picture set forth in that grand old poem, it would be hard to say; but for some reason the mental picture of Anita and Comerio gradually faded, the perception of his own pain passed away, he seemed to be living quite out of the nineteenth century—to be Job and not himself,—though it was, in fact, the personal perception of the truth of the poem which made its effect on him so powerful.

"For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me," read Clare; "and that which I was afraid of is come unto me. I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet, yet trouble came."

When Eliphaz the Temanite began to argue, Carlo felt himself sliding away into blissful drowsiness, and soon Clare perceived that the old charm had worked well, and that he was sound asleep. He slept for some hours; when he opened his eyes the level rays of the setting sun were streaming through

a window which was hidden from him by the bed-curtains, and casting a vivid light on a picture just opposite to him. Now Carlo was one of those who respond more easily to that which appeals to the artistic side of them than to that which appeals to the intellect. The deepest philosophical treatise, the most eloquent sermon, could not possibly have conveyed to him all that was conveyed by that well-known picture of the thorn-crowned Shepherd bearing through the wilderness the sheep that had gone astray. '*FINCHÈ l'abbia trovata!*' urged a voice in his heart: 'UNTIL he find it!' It seemed to him that he had never till that minute realised the eternal constancy of the Good Shepherd, never taken in the truth that while men strive, and fail, and faint by the way, the work they have tried to do does not fail, but is eternally carried on in ways unknown to them. He saw that for the present all he could do was to suffer patiently; but the picture of Nita and Comerio, though it did its best to rise again in his mind, had lost its power of torture; he could always efface it almost instantly with this other picture of the tireless and persistent Shepherd, who in the end must inevitably win back His own, spite of false hirelings, and ravening wolves, and horrors of the wilderness. One glance into his eyes showed Clare that he was himself again, and the doctor, too, on his second visit, was surprised and pleased to find what a favourable turn his patient had taken. The alarming prostration had passed: that terrible depression which seems incapable of wishing to live or of making any effort to recover had given place to a strong desire for health. Though speaking was still an effort to him he asked two or three eager questions.

'Shall I get better, do you think?'

'Oh, there is not a doubt of it, if you go on as well as you have begun,' said the doctor.

'Will my voice be injured?'

'There is no reason that it should not be as good as ever when you recover your strength.'

'How soon could I possibly be fit to sing in public again?'

The doctor liked his spirit, and answered with a smile, 'This day nine weeks, if you have no relapse. But don't excite yourself about it, and don't talk too much. What you want now is perfect rest of mind and body.'

'One word more,' broke in Carlo. 'Is there anything I can do to get well sooner?'

'You can help me very materially by obedience to orders, and by keeping yourself quiet. All anxiety and excitement

will retard your recovery. This attack of pleurisy is the best thing that could have happened to you, for you are altogether overworked and overstrained, and you must have rest. In these hurrying days people seem to have forgotten how to rest, that's the worst of it. If you'll only go on as you have begun this afternoon though, I shall be quite satisfied with you.'

As Sardoni had once remarked, however, Carlo was in some respects 'old-fashioned,' and the doctor found that he had not forgotten even in his overstrained, nineteenth-century life the secret of rest; that he was fast learning what Thomas à Kempis deemed the work of a perfect man, 'To pass through many cares, as it were without care; not with the indifference of a sluggard, but with that privilege of a mind at liberty.'

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A RESTORATION

'Some say that the age of chivalry is past. The age of chivalry is never past as long as there is a wrong left unredressed on earth, and a man or woman left to say, "I will redress that wrong, or spend my life in the attempt." The age of chivalry is never past as long as men have faith enough in God to say, "God will help me to redress that wrong; or if not me, surely He will help those that come after me. For His eternal will is to overcome evil with good."'

CHARLES KINGSLEY.

KATE BRITTON was an indefatigable worker; parish work was her delight, and to her mind the luckless wight who did not go district-visiting, who was not an ardent teetotaler, who could not show a well-ordered Sunday-school class as the visible fruits of persevering work, hardly deserved toleration. Like all workers who are worth much she was full of enthusiasm, and would have been greatly missed in the village; but she was 'ill to live with,' because she had not yet learnt to see things from any point of view but her own, and had an overweening idea of her own importance. Carlo Donati was just now much on her mind; she had a feeling that he must have been brought to Merlebank for some special purpose; and as it was Kate's way to think always of the impression she might make on others, rather than of the impression she might receive from them, she began to consider how she could bring her influence to bear on the Italian, and her enthusiasm was

roused by an idea which came to her one day as she mused over his life. What a glorious thing it would be if she could convince him that he was leading a life unworthy of a true man, and induce him to give up his profession!

With this in view, Kate put up with the infliction of the invalid's presence, and when in a fortnight's time he was well enough to spend most of the day in the morning-room, which adjoined his bedroom, she was really glad to have an opportunity for beginning her operations. As a rule she cordially disliked young men, and the one thorn in the otherwise perfect bliss of her parish-work was the inevitable curate; in her fear that she might be supposed to make her work an excuse for flirtation, she ran to the opposite extreme, openly avowed herself as a man-hater, and snubbed the entire biennial succession of deacons, who were ordained to the title of the quiet little country parish, but at the close of their two years' novitiate invariably passed on to larger spheres of work.

The morning-room was a bright, sunny, cheerful room, facing south, and Carlo enjoyed his change of quarters very much; he was glad to see Kate, too, for she interested him, and he delighted in tracing the slight likeness to Francesca which he had noticed when he first came to Merlebank. Kate, who was inordinately self-conscious, quickly perceived that his eyes followed her as she moved about the room arranging flowers in the vases, and she felt provoked, for it would be so horribly like a story-book if the invalid were to fall in love with her; yet she could not snub him as she snubbed the curate, because she wanted to influence him for his good, and longed for the honour and glory of persuading him to quit the stage. Reflecting that this was the Monday in Holy-Week, she thought she would supply him with suitable literature—at any rate the offer of books would make a good opening for conversation. So she began boldly, yet with an effort that surprised her; somehow, although she had astonishing theories as to the universal depravity of young men, she had an undefined consciousness that Carlo Donati was not so immeasurably beneath her as the curates and the men to be met with at dances and tennis-parties. This perception did not please her.

'Clare said your things had been put in here,' she began; 'but I don't see anything but music, no books at all.'

'I don't think I have any,' said Carlo: 'I am not much of a reader.'

Kate felt dismayed, she could hardly conceive that any one

could get on in life without her particular little library of good books. It was a slight relief to her to discover that among the pile of operas, wedged in between *Masaniello* and *Semiramide*, were a shabby, little Italian Testament and a very minute English Prayer-book.

Carlo on seeing this last gave a quick exclamation.

'Did I leave that out? Will you give it me, please?'

'And even this is not yours, but Francesca's!' she said, laughing, as accidentally she dropped the book and noticed her cousin's name on the flyleaf.

He coloured.

'She lent it to me the first time I went to the English church, and since then I have always had it,' he explained.

'It is dreadful print,' said Kate, in her matter-of-fact way. 'You had better let me lend you a clearer one.'

But Carlo held out his hand for it, and his fingers closed over it jealously.

'It will do very nicely,' he said. 'I don't suppose I shall read it.'

Which illogical statement would possibly have roused Kate's suspicion had she not been racking her brain for the devotional books most appropriate to his case.

She went across to her own particular bookshelf, and, to do her justice, chose out a few books really worth reading; eschewed a *Treasury of Devotion* as likely to be uncongenial to one of Carlo's turn of mind, and returned bearing *The Christian Year*, Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, and a book of meditations for Holy-Week, of which she was fond. He thanked her, but when later in the morning she saw him again, she found, to her great disgust, that he was poring over *Les Huguenots*, and that her books were pushed aside.

'You didn't like them?' she said, with a touch of disappointment in her tone.

'I'm afraid I didn't read much,' he said, apologetically; 'you see to have this music within reach was more than I could resist. We have not yet done *Les Huguenots*, but we shall rehearse it in the summer, and give it in America this autumn. Do you know it well?'

'I have never heard an opera in my life,' said Kate, feeling annoyed at his astonishment. 'Do you really mean to go back to such a life? It must surely be very bad for you.'

'But you see the doctor quite gives me hope of being as strong as ever again,' replied Carlo, thinking she must refer to his health.

'I didn't mean that,' replied Kate; 'I meant it must surely be a very bad life in other ways.'

'It is very much like other lives, I fancy; it is what you like to make it,' he replied, quietly. He did not feel that he could very well enter into a discussion with a young girl on the special temptations of stage-life, and there was a silence.

'But surely all the applause and praise must be very trying?' said Kate.

'Applause always makes me think of a *méringue*,' said Carlo, laughing a little; 'sweet and evanescent, and leaves you longing for more. I don't deny that it is a great pleasure, and a great help, but I think it is a very innocent and legitimate pleasure.'

'It must surely make you very vain?'

'Well, I hope not,' said Carlo, smiling. 'Of course, every artist has to be careful not to get into the way of thinking that his powers are merits instead of gifts. Years ago I heard Togni play at Naples, and you know when our people applaud they applaud tremendously; I shall never forget the deafening outburst; but it seemed to me like a great thanksgiving to God who had given such power to men. It was not Togni we applauded, it was the wonderful beauty and power which he had unfolded for us.'

'But clearly,' said Kate, 'the life must be full of excitement. Surely your constant craving to get back to it again shows how engrossing and dangerous it must be.'

He could not explain to her that it was no anxiety for applause which made him so eager to be back once more in Merlino's troupe, so he turned the conversation, and Kate naturally concluded that her remark had struck home. She despised him for evading the subject, but noticing that he looked tired, offered to read to him.

He seemed relieved at the proposal, and opening the *Christian Year*, asked her to read over again something which had taken his fancy.

'Exactly like his perverseness to choose the Tuesday in Whitsun-Week on the Monday in Holy-Week,' she reflected, knowing nothing of his Whitsuntide associations. Moreover, the poem was the last one she would have expected him to like; it seemed a mockery to her that a man who was 'fooling away his life on the stage' should be struck with the lines,

'And wheresoe'er on earth's wide field  
Ye lift for Him the red-cross shield,  
Be this your song, your joy and pride—  
"Our Champion went before and died."'

It had never occurred to her as a possibility that an operatic singer could appreciate sentiments of that sort. And she would have been scandalised and dismayed could she have known of the unconscious, matter-of-fact way in which Carlo would go from the altar to the theatre, or, if it suited him better as to time, from the theatre to the altar.

Very much perplexed as to the Italian's character, she walked that afternoon down to the village, but had scarcely left the grounds when she encountered the Vicar.

'I was just coming to your house,' he remarked. 'I hear you have a young Italian staying with you, and was coming to inquire after him. Is he better?'

'Oh, he is much better, thank you,' said Kate. 'I wish you would go to see him, for perhaps you who feel so strongly about such matters would be able to persuade him to leave the stage. I can't understand him at all; he seems quite wrapped up in his profession, and it is so sad to think of a really good man wasting his life in work of that sort.'

'I shall be very happy to see him,' said the Vicar; 'it will be quite a treat to me to talk Italian again!' And without more delay he made his way to the house, smiling to himself a little at Kate Britton's eagerness to influence all she came across, and rather pleased at the prospect of a new acquaintance in his small and not very interesting parish. He had preached only a little while ago against theatres, and it was satisfactory to be brought face to face in this way with a veritable member of the profession.

Having received a message that Signor Donati would be very glad to see him, the Vicar followed the servant upstairs to the morning-room, where he found the invalid on a couch drawn close to the fire. He was surprised at his fluent English; his accent, too, was perfect, and it was only by a very slight peculiarity in the intonation, and every now and then by some unusual little bit of phraseology, that he betrayed his foreign birth. His face, however, was unmistakably Italian, and, though he was evidently weak and tired, the Vicar thought him looking much less ill than might have been expected after so serious an attack. The formal greetings were only just over when Carlo, having thoroughly studied the strong, intellectual face of his visitor—his calm, deep-set eyes, and the sort of general air of 'iron-grey' which characterised him—exclaimed, with an excitement which surprised the Vicar,—

'I believe, sir—indeed, I am quite sure—that we have met before!'

Now, the Vicar had at that moment been thinking of his sermon at St. Cyprian's, and admitting to himself that this actor, at any rate, did not at all fit in with his preconceived notion of the members of the 'unhallowed calling,' so, naturally enough, he thought that Carlo must refer to this occasion.

'Can you have been in the congregation at St. Cyprian's when I preached there the other day!' he exclaimed. 'I little thought I was addressing any one connected with the stage.'

'Ah! was it indeed you who preached that sermon?' said Carlo, quickly. 'Yes, I was there with my friend Sardoni, the tenor of the Company; but we were quite at the back of the church, and could not even see the pulpit. Was it indeed you who preached? That is one of the oddest coincidences I ever knew.'

'But when can you have met me before?' said the Vicar, looking puzzled. 'Can I have met you in Italy and have forgotten?'

'Do you remember being in Naples last May, and going one afternoon into one of the *caff  s* in the Piazza Plebiscito, and talking with your companion as to the improvement of the world in general in the nineteenth century?'

'With Stanley!—yes, yes, I remember it quite well!' said the Vicar.

'Do you remember how you said that men were not more willing to live the life of the Crucified? Well, I was sitting close by and heard you, and I owe you much, for those words haunted me continually, and—but this will, I fear, shock you—they helped me to choose my present profession.'

The Vicar smiled a little. He could just perceive, though not so clearly as Carlo perceived, the irony of the situation. Mr. Britton had given him a hint as to Donati's motive in going on the stage, and had expressed a hope that the Vicar, if he had any opportunity, would do his best to dissuade him from returning to it, feeling convinced that Madame Merlino's case was hopeless. And now to be told that it was in some degree owing to words of his that the choice had been made was, to say the least of it, startling, while the knowledge that the Italian had been listening in St. Cyprian's to his tirade against theatres vexed him not a little. The Vicar was a kind-hearted man, though many people considered him hard; but, as a matter of fact, the idea of having denounced such a man as Donati to his face, and having probably pained him, caused him serious annoyance.



'I have always disapproved of the stage,' he said after a brief pause. 'But I am exceedingly sorry that you heard that sermon the other night, for it must have seemed hard and unjust to you, I am afraid.'

'I will tell you quite candidly just how it was,' said Carlo. 'It did vex me, I must allow, but then I was beginning to feel ill and overdone, and had had rather a rough time of it through the week, and it seemed hard to lose the sense of fellowship which one counts on getting, at any rate, in church. But what vexed me most of all, and perhaps made me exaggerate your denunciation, was that my friend Sardoni, who does not go in much for church services, happened that night to have come with me.'

'Did it do him harm, do you think?' asked the Vicar.

Carlo hesitated.

'He was very angry about it,' he said, at length; 'unreasonably angry, I thought. But he has a good deal to trouble him, and there were reasons which made any attack from the Church on our profession specially painful to him.'

He broke off as the door opened, and looked with feverish eagerness towards the servant who entered with the afternoon letters. Just at this time he seemed to live in perpetual craving for post-time; for not only was he terribly anxious to hear from Sardoni how matters were going on in the Company, but he had always an undefined hope that some one at Merlebank would hear from Francesca, and that at least some fragments of the letter might be read or quoted in his presence. This afternoon there arrived the letter from Sardoni for which he had looked and waited so long.

'Will you excuse me just for one minute?' he said. 'This is from my friend Sardoni, of whom we were just speaking. If you will allow me—I am ashamed to ask such a thing—but I am very anxious to see how things are going with them.'

He opened the envelope, tossed it aside, and began to read eagerly. Involuntarily the Vicar glanced at the handwriting of the direction. It was large and marked—a peculiar and thoroughly characteristic hand. The colour rose to his forehead—his lips trembled. He waited, partly to recover his self-control, partly to allow Carlo time to glance through the letter, then, with undisguised eagerness, he exclaimed—

'This friend of yours, Signor Donati,—what did you say he was called?'

'Sardoni; he is the *primo tenore* of our Company. Such a good-hearted fellow! I don't know what I should do without him.'

'But that perhaps is an assumed name! What is his true name? Is he not an Englishman?'

'He is English, but he keeps entirely to his *nom-de-guerre*,' said Carlo.

'Even you, his friend, do not know his true name?'

'Yes, I do know it; but he does not wish it generally known. Have you any special reason for asking? Good heavens!' he exclaimed, as an idea suddenly occurred to him; 'can it possibly be that which altered him so much after the sermon? Sir, I beg you to tell me your name? I have only heard you spoken of as the Vicar.'

'My name is John Postlethwayte,' said the Vicar, watching with anxiety indescribable the effect of his words on the Italian.

There was no mistaking the intense excitement which dawned in Carlo's face.

'You saw and recognised this writing?' he asked, breathlessly, pointing to the envelope; then as the Vicar signed an assent, 'Thank God, I have come across you! I see there can be no doubt that you are his father!'

Tears started to the Englishman's eyes. Carlo observed this with relief. The Vicar did not seem nearly so hard and uncompromising as Sardoni had led him to expect.

'My son was here, then, in Ashborough!' he exclaimed—'was actually in the church that night, and never came near me! I have spent my life in looking for him!—have wandered all over the Continent in the hope of finding him once more!—and does he now avoid and shun me when we are in the same town?'

'It must have been that which made him feel the sermon so much,' said Carlo. 'He knew you disapproved of the stage; he was afraid you would not believe that he had turned over a new leaf—he told me that long ago; and then, of course, when he heard you speak so strongly against actors and their calling he would naturally be repulsed and disheartened!'

The Vicar paced the room in great distress. It was indescribably bitter to him to realise that his son should have happened to hear that one sermon, and to reflect that the whole course of his life might have been altered had his theme been of reconciliation and charity.

'But all will be well now,' said Carlo; 'for, if you have searched for him, then you must really care to be reconciled to him—and, indeed, he wishes your forgiveness. The very first

day after we landed in England, he went straight to your old home, fully expecting to find you there. It was then he told me all about it, and gave me his true name. Poor Jack ! I shall never forget his misery when he found a stranger in your place.'

'Did he go, indeed, to the old home?' said the Vicar, eagerly. 'My poor boy, if only I had been there to meet him ! But surely he could have found out in the village where I had gone to?'

'He did send me to make inquiries,' said Carlo, 'and the old sexton told me you were at Cleevering, in Mountshire. But when Jack found how, through his fault, your home had been broken up and your work spoiled, he said he could not write to you or seek you out. Indeed, I doubt if we shall ever get him here unless we take him altogether by surprise. He would say that he would not come back to be a disgrace to you in a new parish.'

'Then I must go to him !' said the Vicar.

Carlo hesitated. He pictured to himself the sort of meeting that might take place in one of the second-rate hotels, or in the dingy lodgings which Merlino's Company frequented, where privacy was out of the question, and where Sardoni, because of his surroundings, would certainly not show to the greatest advantage. He thought of the gossip which would be set afloat in the Company, and realised how distasteful it would all be to his friend.

'If you don't mind,' he said, 'I think it would be much better if I wrote to him and begged him to come down and see me ; I think I could write urgently enough to bring him, and on Good Friday there will of course be no opera, and it is possible that he might even be able to arrange to stay over Easter Monday. Will you mind just handing me that pocket-book, and I will see where the Company will be? Ah, yes, I thought so ; they will be at Worcester, and on the Saturday will be giving *Marta*. I have no doubt that Merlino will let Caffieri take Lionello in Jack's place ; he did so once in the autumn.'

Spite of his excitement and anxiety the Vicar could not but perceive that his visit was tiring the invalid.

'I am ashamed to have forgotten your illness in my own great joy,' he said, rising to go. 'I little thought what news awaited me when I came here.'

'This is worth being ill for,' said Carlo. 'I shall write to Jack by the first post to-morrow.'

Probably the doctor would highly have disapproved had he

known of the little plot which was being worked out in his patient's room; but only Clare and Mr. Britton were taken into the secret, and in truth the excitement and hope acted like a sort of tonic, and Carlo forgot for a time his own anxieties in planning his various arrangements for that eventful Good Friday. Sardoni had written to say that he would come at half-past three in the afternoon, and Carlo awaited his arrival in some trepidation. Remembering the unpleasant sensation he had experienced at Piale's house of having been entrapped, he abandoned the rather stagey idea which had first suggested itself to him, of allowing Sardoni to be shown in upon his father without any preparation. Nevertheless, he was too thorough an Italian not to be dramatic, and the Vicar was glad enough to trust the management of all to one who really knew his son much better than he could pretend to do. He listened to the Italian's ideas with some surprise, but he did not call them in question. Sardoni might now be expected to arrive at any minute, and the Vicar, waiting with Carlo in the morning-room, was enduring tortures of suspense and anxiety.

'When we hear him arrive,' said Carlo, quietly, 'I want you to go through that inner door into the next room; leave the door ajar. Then, when Jack comes, I will tell him the whole truth, and how I came across you, and how you recognised his writing. That being settled, I shall ask him to help me to my bedroom. When you hear us get up, then leave my room where you have waited by the other door, leading into the passage, and come back here. I know you are thinking me like a stage-manager, but, don't you see, this is the only means of getting me out of the way. You will now meet alone and unobserved; Jack will have been prepared, and will not feel that we have dealt unfairly by him; and yet he will in a sense be surprised when he goes back to find you there, because he will have been bracing up his mind to the idea of seeking you out at the Vicarage.'

All these little considerations would never have occurred to Mr. Postlethwayte; he was dreadfully afraid that something would not work, that he should make a blunder and forget when to make his exit, or by what door. But Carlo seemed to have perfect confidence in his little plot; and when the supreme moment arrived, the Vicar, waiting in the inner room, began to feel confidence in the man who had planned all with such perfect appreciation of the feelings of others, and whose sole thought of himself had been how, when his work was over, he could best be got out of the way.

And now a brisk, familiar step was heard in the passage, the maid-servant announced in the most prim and ordinary way, 'Signor Sardoni,' and the next moment Jack strode into the room. The Vicar bit his lip hard as he heard the hearty, cheerful voice which had been silent to him for so many years.

'Well, old fellow, how are you? Why, you are looking almost yourself again. This is a case of Mother Hubbard's dog; I thought I should find you ready to make your last will and testament, as you were so anxious to see me once more. I shall take back good news for the troupe; we are all longing for you back again, though Comerio tries hard to be civil, and to win golden opinions. And that reminds me, Val; I've just hit upon a way of turning an honest penny.'

'What's that?' said Carlo, getting in a word with difficulty.

'Why, I mean to write a sensational article for one of the Reviews, on the Italian Character. The motto to be the old nursery rhyme, adapted,

"When they are good, they are very, very good,  
And when they are bad they are horrid."

That man is a fiend, his cunning and malice are beyond anything I ever knew.'

Presently I want you to tell me all,' interposed Carlo, seizing at once on the momentary pause. 'But, Jack, first of all, there is something I must tell you. What parish do you think this house is in?'

'Parish! How should I know?' said Sardoni.

'It is in the parish of Cleevering,' said Carlo, quietly.

Sardoni sprang to his feet.

'Good God, Donati!—and did you bring me here for that reason? Have I not told you that nothing will induce me to revive the old disgrace? Look here! that attack we heard in the church the other night on the stage—that was spoken by my father! Do you think, after that, he would care to have me coming home?'

'I know he would,' said Carlo. 'Don't be angry, Jack; just hear me quietly to the end. I did not betray you, but your father has found you out.' He told him graphically just what had happened, then continued: 'Do you think he was thinking of the "disgrace" when he threw up everything to go and search for you on the Continent? Do you think he cares a rush for what people say when his first impulse was to go straight to Worcester and see you? Perhaps it would have been better, after all, if I had not suggested this other plan.'

'No, no!' broke in Sardoni; 'I could never have stood that. But yet, I doubt if I can do it, Val. It was hard enough last time with you. And alone! No, I can't do it! You'll never know what it is to an Englishman—the mere walking up to the house and ringing the bell!'

'But you would at least do as much as that for one who has tramped all over Europe for you?' said Carlo.

'It's not that,' said Sardoni, brushing his hand impatiently across his eyes. 'It's not that I mean! Upon my soul, Donati, I think you are too good to understand how it is with me.'

Carlo replied only by one of his expressive gestures.

'Too tired to discuss the matter further, we will say. Give me an arm, will you, Jack? I will go to my room and rest, and will see you again later on.'

'I forgot how ill you had been!' said Sardoni, with compunction. 'And now I have tired you, and thought only of my own affairs, like the brute that I am!'

He helped him into the adjoining room, and Carlo, conscious of much the same sensation about the heart as he had felt on the night of his first appearance in public, dismissed him.

'If you ring the bell in the next room,' he remarked, 'they'll show you to your room, or, if you make up your mind to go to the vicarage, steer for the church tower, and you can't mistake the house, for they say there is none other near.'

'I wish you were about, and could go there with me,' said Sardoni, with a sigh.

'You are much better alone. I told you last time I should only have been in the way. Now for my *siesta*. *A rivederci!*'

Sardoni turned away slowly and with a sort of reluctance—almost as if he were already in imagination rehearsing that difficult return which Carlo had spoken of. To steer straight for the church tower! What a walk that would be!—what a fight would be involved in every step! He closed the door, and once more re-entered the morning-room. Was that Mr. Britton standing by the window? But at the sound of the shutting of the door the figure turned, and crossed the room in eager haste.

Sardoni's heart beat like a sledge-hammer; the tears rushed to his eyes.

'Father!' he faltered. 'Did you come?—are you here?'

And Carlo himself would have been satisfied could he have seen the manner of their meeting.

When they could speak, the Vicar replied to the incoherent question.

'It was your friend's doing! He thought this would be the best place.'

'It is all his doing!' said Sardoni, in a choked voice.

There was a pause, broken at last by the father.

'Let us come home together!' he said.

And Carlo, lying tired-out in the next room, heard the door of the morning-room open, and knew that all was well, and pictured to himself how the two would walk together towards the house by the church, and how Sardoni would smile to himself when he found that there was no question as to ringing of bells, since the father would throw the door wide, and himself take him into the new home where even dark memories would not be allowed to enter and spoil the peace of their reconciliation.

But what passed he never actually knew, because there are things too sacred to be put into words—things which men learn to take on trust even with their closest friends.

Sardoni returned in the evening, and talked of Anita, and Comerio, and Gigi, and of the various vicissitudes of the Company in the last three weeks. But on Easter Eve, in the morning, when Carlo, like a true Neapolitan, desired to begin the Festa, the Vicar came true to his appointment, and with him came his son.

'You will have the necessary third without me,' whispered Clare, thinking they would rather be alone. 'I will go.'

'No,' said Carlo. 'I should like to have you both, if you don't mind. Jack, this is my friend, Miss Claremont.'

Clare welcomed him quietly, and the two friends just gripped each other's hands, and not another word passed between them till they had joined in their Easter communion.

The Vicar was a man of large experience, and he had learnt not to be very much surprised at the extraordinary coincidences of life, and to believe in the truth of the saying that it is the unexpected which happens. But, with all his knowledge of life, he would hardly have credited the words of one who had foretold to him that within a few weeks of his denunciation of the stage he should be under the deepest of obligations to an operatic singer, and should have joined with him, and with his long-lost son, in the most sacred act of worship and sign of fellowship.

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## CHAPTER XXIX

## CONVALESCENT

'Look not on thine own loss, but look beyond,  
And take the Cross for glory and for guide.'

MRS. HAMILTON KING.

WHEN the excitement of Sardoni's visit was over, Carlo flagged a little, but the weariness and languor were far less trying to bear than what followed. He could live patiently enough through those days—could even enjoy the family life going on around him—could be quietly amused at Kate's efforts to conform him to her own ideal of what a young man should be—could find comfort in talking to Clare about the old days at Casa Bella, and about his mother.

But by-and-by, when his strength returned, there came very different days—days when he felt that to live any longer without Francesca was more than mortal man could bear—days when in very truth his own words to her in the belvedere were fulfilled, and to be without her was to be crucified. His love for Francesca was no light sentiment, no passing fancy; it was the strongest, most ardent love that man can feel for woman. He loved her with his whole being—with the passionate warmth of a southern nature—with the force of a pure and noble soul—with the lofty, undying devotion of an awakened spirit. It was inevitable that he should suffer; and though of course such times were nothing new to him, he could not in his present state plunge into work, or into the affairs of other people, as in his ordinary life he had found comfort in doing.

Worst of all, he knew that his kindly host—the only one able to guess what was the matter with him—desired nothing so much as to see him quitting the stage and marrying his niece.

But if pain was inevitable, failure was not so. He loved as a man loves at four-and-twenty, but he had the strength of one who has resolutely denied himself and honestly tried to be true to his profession; 'his strength was as the strength of ten.' And when Mr. Britton urged his view of the case upon him with the best and kindest of intentions, he always fell back on the certainty that his duty had been made clear to him, and on the faith which was his great stronghold, and which, in its fearless unselfishness, differed as much from credulity as day from night.



Strangely enough, the man to whom he instinctively turned most at this time was Sardoni's father. He disagreed with the Vicar on politics, on many theological points, on the question of the stage, and on most other things, and yet there was something in the man's great goodness which made all else quite a secondary consideration, which even made one forget his tendency to lay down the law, and only delight in the sense of his devotion. Without that touch of dogmatism he would have been a saint; his failing interfered a good deal with his influence in most quarters, but with Carlo hardly at all. The beautiful goodness of the man attracted him too strongly, and quite eclipsed all else. It was a relief, too, when he was allowed to go out again for the briefest of airings on sunny days when the wind was favourable; and after a time he was able to read Dante with Kate and Lucy, and to study *Zampa*, and, little by little, to find that the outer world was not so altogether flavourless as in his dark days it had seemed.

One sunny spring day, when the doctor had allowed him to go for a short drive, Clare and Kate took him for the first time outside the Merlebank grounds, and drove him through the little village of Cleevering. By this time he had himself pretty well in hand—had schooled himself into a sort of content with incompleteness—had worked himself round to the state in which he could feel that it was at any rate something to be with Francesca's relations, to hear her name every now and then, to be at least certain of knowing if she were in any particular need or trouble.

'We may as well call for the letters as we are passing the post-office,' said Kate, drawing up at the village shop. She sprang out of the chaise, Carlo offering to hold the pony for her. He had neither ridden nor driven since he had left Italy, and the mere feeling of the reins between his fingers awoke new life within him; it was long since he had been able really to desire any attainable thing, but now he was seized with a strong desire to ride once more, and the mere capability of wishing was a relief. He had an almost boyish pleasure in feeling the movements of the pony's head as it champed the bit, in hearing the impatient pawing of the ground.

'Two letters for you, Clare,' said Kate, reappearing; and Clare took them rather anxiously, and opening the one from her home began to read.

'None for me?' asked Carlo.

'Not one,' said Kate, tossing two or three envelopes on to

the vacant seat. He instantly detected that one of them bore the blue stamp of Italy. Was it from Francesca? he wondered, or perhaps from Captain Britton to his brother? It was something to be staying in a house where letters were received from Casa Bella, and yet it was a sort of torture to him to sit quietly in the pony-chaise, obliged to content himself with studying the length of King Humbert's moustache and the big letters of 'NAPOLI' on the postmark. Doubtless, he thought, the letter had been posted as they went in to church on Sunday, and he hardly knew whether the thought made him feel nearer to his love or more hopelessly cut off from her. He did not dare to ask any questions lest he should awaken Kate's suspicion, but he hoped against hope that she would speak and put him out of his suspense. Kate, however, talked of the scenery, and the weather, and the spring-green of the trees, and of every unimportant thing under the sun; but of that letter she said not a word, and he had to endure walking upstairs behind her when they reached the house and seeing her disappear with it into her own room.

It was hard; but then sore need had taught him to be thankful for small mercies, and he cheered himself with the reflection that at any rate he was now tolerably certain that the letter was from Francesca herself, that by this time she knew of his illness, for Clare had mentioned it in one of her letters, and that it was even remotely possible that the Captain might have permitted her to send some message. Torturing himself with hopes and fears after the manner of lovers, he waited as long as he could make himself wait upstairs, then, with the hope predominating and the impatience no longer to be resisted, found his way into the drawing-room and looked eagerly round for Kate. The room was empty, but on the mantelpiece there gleamed the blue King Humbert and the big 'NAPOLI,' and the direction in Francesca's own writing to 'Miss Britton, Merlebank, nr. Ashborough, Inghilterra.'

He longed to snatch it up and kiss it, but restrained himself because even the envelope was not his; with a sigh he crossed the room and tried to make the time pass by playing all Francesca's favourite airs, and after what seemed a long while the footman came in with the afternoon tea, and was soon followed by Mr. Britton.

'You are early home this afternoon,' said Carlo, leaving the piano and shivering a little as he came over to the fire.

'I have an appointment at Cleevering at half-past five, and thought I would snatch a cup of tea on the way,' said Mr.

Britton. 'You don't look quite so well ; I'm afraid you have been overtiring yourself.'

'Oh, no, thank you,' said Carlo, wondering how his companion could stand within a yard of Francesca's letter and not notice it. 'I have been for a drive to-day, and enjoyed it very much.'

'That's right,' said the shipbuilder, in his kindly voice. 'We must begin to lionise you now that you are getting stronger. You ought to go over to Tancroft Castle: it is a fine old Norman ruin. You would find a great deal to interest you there.'

Carlo thought differently ; at any rate just at the present moment he was inclined to wish all fine old Norman ruins at the bottom of the sea. It was horrible to feel that he, with his ardent love, must be patiently polite, and must depend on others for the smallest scrap of tidings from Francesca. At length old Bevis, the deer-hound, came to his help, by stretching up his head and licking his master's hand. Mr. Britton bent down to pat his old favourite, and as he raised his head again his eye was attracted by the foreign letter on the mantelpiece.

'Ah !' he exclaimed, 'a letter from Casa Bella? What news?'

'I do not know,' said Carlo. 'I was not here when Miss Britton read it.'

Something of the chafed, impatient craving, which was making tumult in his heart, found its way into his voice. Mr. Britton, understanding all perfectly well, felt very sorry for him. He took up the letter, and going out into the hall called his daughter.

Kate came running downstairs in reply to the summons, looking hurried and annoyed.

'How early you have come home, father !' she exclaimed. 'I was just trying to get the "Mothers'-Meeting" accounts right.'

'I am sorry to have interrupted you, my dear ; but will you make tea, for I have to go down to the village directly?'

Kate, in no very good temper, approached the tea-table, perceived that the tray was crooked, and set it straight with a gesture betraying inward irritation. Carlo, as usual, offered his services with the kettle, but was so absent-minded that he was far from proving an efficient helper, and only made Kate feel that everything was conspiring together to annoy her. Surely only a lover could have been so absent as to go on filling a teapot till it overflowed, and to be deaf to repeated orders to stop? Was this tiresome Italian really going to fall in love with the daughter of his host like the hero of a novel?

All his apologies could not make her unbend from the chilly reserve in which she encased herself.

'What news from Casa Bella?' asked Mr. Britton, when the disaster on the tea-tray no longer engrossed the general attention.

'Oh!' said Kate, bestowing a cup of tea on Carlo with a frigid air that was quite lost on him, 'Francesca writes to ask if she may come next week instead of in June. It's very provoking, for I shall be so busy just then, and there will be no tennis or anything to amuse her.'

Carlo did not dare to raise his eyes lest the wild rapture of hope which was filling them should become visible to Kate. He sat mechanically stirring his tea, making so strong an effort to control his face and keep his joy secret, that he felt as if his features must have become as expressionless as a block of wood.

'I don't fancy she is much of a tennis-player,' said Mr. Britton. 'Is there no enclosure for me?'

'Oh, yes, I beg your pardon, father; I quite forgot; there is a line for you from Uncle Britton and a little note from Francesca, too.'

Mr. Britton glanced through them, then deliberately handed Francesca's note to Carlo, possibly intending his daughter to draw her own conclusions from the act.

'I am glad she comes earlier, you two are old friends, and it would be a pity that you should not meet.'

But Kate observed nothing, for she was full of her pre-conceived theory. She did not notice the quick flush which rose to Carlo's brow as he took the letter; instead, she was secretly resolving to lose no opportunity of snubbing the Italian, and proving that she was quite indifferent to him, and was above that despicable feminine weakness of falling in love with a handsome face and a fine voice.

'Will you have any more tea, Signor Donati?' she asked, in her coldly polite voice.

'No more, thank you,' said Carlo, looking up for a moment from the letter.

His eyes startled her, there was an expression in their dark, liquid depths which she had never seen before in the eyes of any man. She got up quickly.

'If you'll excuse me, father, I will just finish those accounts,' she said. 'Clare and the girls will be down directly.'

Meanwhile, Carlo, feeling like one in a beautiful dream, which is only marred by the dim consciousness that there must be an awaking, read and re-read the following note:—

'DEAR UNCLE GEORGE,—Thank you so much for your letters ; I never thought it possible that father would let me come, but something in your note to him has made him consent ; and also, perhaps, something that has happened here makes him see that I had better leave home for a little while. It was just like you to keep your promise in that way, and be Carlo's friend, and just like you, too, to write so often, for I have been dreadfully anxious. Father says, can you conveniently meet me, or send some one to meet me, at Charing Cross by the tidal train on Wednesday morning ? He does not much like me to come such a long way alone, and the lady with whom I travel from Naples only goes as far as London.

'Ever, dear Uncle, your loving niece,

'FRANCESCA BRITTON.'

He had his moments of unalloyed bliss, then came the inevitable awaking.

'Do you think I ought to go away ?' he said, returning the letter to Mr. Britton.

There was something so appealing in his tone that Mr. Britton felt a genuine thrill of pleasure in being able to answer, with a clear conscience,—

'Certainly not ; the most scrupulous sense of honour can't demand that, since her father is perfectly well aware that you are staying with us.'

'What do you think makes him willing to let us meet ?' said Carlo, anxiously.

'Well, to speak quite frankly, I think that probably Francesca has just refused some good offer of marriage, and that my brother finds that it is hopeless to see her settled in life as he would wish while her heart is here at Merlebank. Very possibly he hopes,—as I, too, confess I hope,—that circumstances will lead you to see that it is useless for you to continue any longer on the stage, and that all may end well, and you and Francesca be "very happy ever after," as they say in the stories.'

Carlo was silent, for suddenly, in that comfortable English drawing-room, there flashed across his mind the old temptation, which he thought could never have risen again after the decisive blow dealt it in the garden at Villa Bruno. This time the strong point of his character, his genuine humility, was appealed to.

'See,' urged the tempter, 'you are wrecking Francesca's life and your own all from an overstrained notion of self-

sacrifice. Is it likely you will succeed in saving Anita? Leave that to better and wiser people. All the best men and women you know think you are mistaken,—think that you will fail. Are you going to be so headstrong and conceited as still to persist in this unnecessary sacrifice? You have tried your best, and have failed,—you know that you have miserably failed. To go on longer would be mere presumption and vanity.'

He turned away and stood in the window, looking out at the mellow western sky and at the grassy slopes beneath the trees in the park, where sheep were peacefully feeding. The sight made him think of the thorn-crowned Shepherd. But instantly the fiend turned even this to his advantage, and beset him more vigorously than ever.

'Are you so stupid and vain as to think the world needs such a man as you to take care of it? Go home to Italy, and live the peaceful life for which you are so much better fitted. Do you think the Good Shepherd needs *your* help? Do you think He can't get on just as well without *you*?''

But the vision of the Constant Shepherd would not fade, and a voice, less vehement but more familiar to him, said plainly, 'Follow Me.'

'Do you mean to say,' resumed the fiend, 'that you are going to bear all your life this miserable incompleteness? Remember what you have suffered this last fortnight! If you think you can bear such misery for long you are mistaken. All your life long—think of it!—think of it! If you dream of being strong enough to bear such a life you vastly overrate your own powers.'

But again, more clearly, the other voice repeated, 'Follow Me!'

At this minute Clare and the younger girls entered the drawing-room.

'Have you had tea, Signor Donati?' said Molly, who dearly loved officiating at the tea-table in the absence of her elders and betters.

'Did you like your drive?' chirped Flo, dancing up to him in her free, childish fashion.

He came back with an effort to the outer life, and began to hand about plates of cake and bread-and-butter, and to wait upon everyone, as was his wont, while Mr. Britton told Clare about Francesca's visit.

'Why, that will seem delightfully natural to have both you and Francesca here with me,' said Clare. 'You will like to meet her again, and hear all the news from Pozzuoli.'

'Yes, unless my doctor has permitted me by that time to set to work again,' said Carlo, quietly.

'Oh, but he will not; you know he said nine weeks from the first.'

'Yes, yes,' said Mr. Britton, 'you need at least three more weeks' rest before thinking of work,—myself I doubt if even then you will be fit for it; we shall see what Kavanagh says.'

No more passed on the subject just then, but after dinner, when Harry had left the dining-room to escort Kate down to one of her evening classes in the village, Carlo spoke once more about it to Mr. Britton, having gained much in the interval.

'What I want to ask you is this,' he began, in his direct, unembarrassed way; 'Am I justified in staying on here in the same house with Francesca when I have not the least idea of renouncing the stage, when I hope to be able to resist all temptations to yield, when I sincerely believe that Captain Britton's expectations will be frustrated?'

'I like you the better for thinking out the matter so frankly,' said Mr. Britton; 'but it seems to me that the responsibility rests with my brother. If he chooses to send Francesca here I don't see that you are bound to trouble about his expectations. I suppose it will, at any rate, be some comfort to you both to meet even as ordinary acquaintances with other people around, and I advise you to get what pleasure you can out of the slight concession my brother has been willing to make. "Take the goods the gods provide you." You can certainly do that with a clear conscience.'

'Thank you,' said Carlo, gratefully; 'it has been a great help to talk it over with you. I think I may stay.'

The week of rapturous expectation that followed was the happiest he had known since the abrupt ending of his betrothal. He went about with a glad light in his eyes, which made Kate more and more repressive; his step was no longer the step of an invalid, his voice grew stronger each day, he felt in harmony with the delicious spring weather, for all cares had faded from his mind, and he was conscious once more of youth and hope,—conscious that of late he had felt preposterously old, and that now he felt ridiculously but delightfully young.

Counting the days, and indeed the very hours, he lived through the interval, and at length the day on which Francesca was expected came. But, to his surprise, as it advanced, the expectation changed to torment; he could only sit watching the clock, and from time to time looking from the window with

a restless agitation which put happiness out of the question. At last the supreme moment arrived; he heard the wheels of the carriage and the sudden rush of girls from the schoolroom; then Clare looked in for a minute.

'She is just here; but don't come out into the hall, Carlo, for the wind is so cold to-day.'

He made some sort of reply and felt relieved that Clare left the drawing-room door open as she hastened out to greet her pupil. Good heavens! how was he to meet her like an ordinary acquaintance! His breathing was laboured, his heart throbbed, he trembled from head to foot; yet through it all he listened with longing indescribable. Ah, yes! that was her voice! above all the tumult within and without.

'How are you, dear Clare?' it said; and again, after a pause, 'A beautiful crossing, thank you. Why, Flo, how you have grown!'

The voice was drawing nearer and nearer, the oppression grew frightful. With an effort he rose to his feet, and at that instant caught the first glimpse of his love as she crossed the hall—the pure, sweet, delicate face, with its lovely colouring; the slight, lithe figure; the grey eyes, seeking him out eagerly, yet so shyly. He went quickly forward to meet her, unable to feel for very excess of feeling, bewildered and overpowered by the tumult that her presence caused.

And yet it was all over so soon, this meeting which he had rehearsed so often, both waking and sleeping; a conventional hand-clasp, a smile carefully regulated, a few quick words of Italian, since his native tongue came naturally to him, and for the moment he could not remember a single word of English. After that there was a pause which he did not dare to break because he knew he could not steady his voice, all he could do was to try to look and move naturally, and to get back the perception that his arms were his own in time to hand about the cups of tea which Kate, in her cool, business-like way, was preparing.

After a while he began to hear what the others were saying, and soon Francesca's sweet, low voice thrilled through him once more, and before long he was carried away by the happiness of the present, and, forgetting the past, dared to put in his oar, so that the conversation became general, he taking a natural share in it, and falling back to the old footing of the days when Francesca had been his playmate and friend.

At first the mere possibility of looking at her, talking to



her, and waiting on her, kept him happy. When Mr. Britton was present he was a little less at his ease, because he knew that the kindly host was well aware of their story ; but by day, when only old Mrs. Britton, or Clare, or the girls were present, he seemed really able to ignore the past, and act as though their three weeks' betrothal had never been. The sense of helping her to play this part, the knowledge that he could shield and protect her, was no small incentive, though at times he half wished that Captain Britton had permitted Clare to be told, because her sympathy would have been so well worth having.

As to Kate, both the lovers were unable to help being amused by her, for Francesca quickly perceived her desire to convert Carlo to her own ideas, and Carlo instinctively knew that she had perceived it.

But one rainy morning, when the two girls were at work in the morning-room, Francesca found that there are times when an undeclared love-story has its disadvantages.

'I have hardly seen you alone, yet,' began Kate, 'and there is so much I wanted to talk to you about. But you see I have been so frightfully busy since you came ; indeed it has been one incessant rush of work all through the spring, and having Signor Donati here takes up more time than people might fancy.'

'It was so good of uncle to ask him here,' said Francesca, keeping her eyes fixed on her needlework.

'Father is always doing that kind of thing. But we have never had a visitor here for so long whom I felt to understand so little ; I don't think I like him very much.'

'Don't you ?' said Francesca, stifling a strong inclination to laugh.

'Well, he is so deceptive ; he gives you the impression of being so good and thinking so much of other people, and yet I can't make out that he has done one single stroke of good, useful work in his life. He seems to me exactly like the fig-tree which had nothing but leaves. How can he bear to waste his life on the stage ?'

'You must not malign my old friend,' said Francesca, flushing crimson, yet still feeling more amused than angry, because Kate was so ludicrously mistaken, and so perfectly convinced that she must infallibly be right.

'Well, since you are his friend, do just candidly tell me,—Is he so good as Clare makes out ? Is he really so delightful as my father seems to think ?'

The sceptical stress on the 'Is he?' made the question all the more embarrassing. To be coolly asked her unbiassed opinion of the man she loved was a new experience to Francesca; for a moment she lost her presence of mind. What in the world could she say? How was she to gain the composed tone needful for a reply?

'Oh, yes, indeed he is!' she said at length, in a tolerably natural tone. 'I have known him for years and years, you know.'

And then, because the answer seemed to her so absurdly inadequate, and because she was vexed with Kate for having asked such a question, she felt ready to cry.

But, luckily, Kate was not observant. She went on serenely, 'Well, for my part, I don't understand that kind of man. I don't think I understand Italians at all.'

At that moment Carlo entered, overhearing the last words. He at once guessed that Kate had been attacking Francesca as to his character, and knowing that they would feel uncomfortable, said in his easy way, 'Not even after all our Dante readings, Miss Britton? Has not our great poet raised your opinion of his countrymen? I am afraid you are very hard on the South.'

'Well, frankly,' said Kate, 'I don't understand southern natures; and why you are so wrapped up in your country I can't imagine.'

'You see, to you, Italy is merely "a geographical expression," as Prince Metternich used to say. To me, it is the land for which my father, and his father before him, fought and died.'

He broke off rather abruptly, afraid of repelling her English nature by too much warmth of utterance. He had not lived so much among English people without learning to restrain his speech, and bring it round pretty nearly to the conventional terseness of a true Briton. Francesca knew that, had they been alone, a torrent of Italian would have escaped his lips, and the full force of his eager patriotism would have been revealed.

'You will think me very blunt,' said Kate, 'but I really don't see what you Italians have to be so proud of. I don't see that you have any great men to boast of—except, of course, painters and musicians.'

Carlo laughed. 'You will at least allow us Dante?'

'Dante belongs to the world,' said Kate.

'True, that might also be said of Shakspeare; yet Shakspeare is English and Dante is Italian.'

'Dante counts among the artists,' said Kate, in her decided tone. 'You have no other great men.'

Francesca sat watching the disputants, intensely amused at Kate's calm, argumentative manner; as to Carlo, he seemed gradually losing his English sobriety, and the more Kate attacked his nation the more Italian he became.

'What!' he exclaimed. 'Do you then wish for greater men than Galileo, than Savonarola, than Columbus, than Daniele Manin, than Mazzini, than Garibaldi? Is it nothing to have produced a man of science like Galvani, a saint like Francesco of Assisi, patriots like Pellico and Poerio?'

Now Silvio Pellico was no hero to Kate; she smiled at the mention of his name. He only meant to her a long dull Italian book which she had struggled half through, until, to her delight, she had been promoted to *I Promessi Sposi*. She had not lived with Pellico in his stifling cell under the *pionbi* at Venice, or wearied with him through his long years in the Austrian fortress, as Carlo had done in his childhood.

'You care so much for your country,' she remarked, 'but after all, patriotism seems to me a very narrow thing—we ought instead to love the whole human race.'

He started to his feet with a gesture that surprised her.

'Believe me!' he exclaimed, 'you are mistaken. There is no true love of race till you love your own land; just as there is no "charity," in the wide sense of the word, till you have genuine love for those of your own family. For what else are we set in families and in nations? And how is it that we have any number of people vaguely longing to work for "humanity" and sentimentalising about the "masses" in the humanitarian cant of the day, and a mere handful of men and women ready to make their own homes the heaven on earth that a home might be? It is because we all want to begin at the wrong end, to launch out on the great undertakings before we have been faithful to the smaller duties. Because we mistake the meaning of sacrifice, and choose our own way even in that, and hunger for the great, and the striking, and the picturesque, but are slow to sacrifice ourselves for one akin to us, or for a cause which is unattractive, or for a unit instead of a vague multitude.'

There was a force and passion in what he said that appealed to Kate's honest nature. But the words struck home, because she knew only too well that, while ready to slave for her school-children or for the poor, she was often cross and tyrannical to her own brothers and sisters. She thought Carlo must be alluding

to her, but, as a matter of fact, she was far from his thoughts ; and what made him able to speak with so much fire on an abstract subject was that he spoke of the things which he knew, of the things which he had proved by fierce and long conflict.

'And yet,' said Kate, angry at having the tables turned on her, 'you, who speak so enthusiastically about sacrifice, and all the rest of it, can be content to sing, and act, and amuse people, while the poor are starving, and sinning, and dying ! You can be content to fiddle like Nero while Rome is burning ! Oh, it seems to me unworthy of you ! You can't be content with such a life !'

He turned his clear, deep eyes full upon her.

'With what I make of it—no,' he replied. 'With the life itself, with my calling—quite content—quite ! See ! a year ago I talked Socialism, and theorised, and longed to solve the problems of the day, and thought that by speaking and agitating the Utopian age would be brought on. But I see now that it is quite possible to theorise about the better arrangement of the world, and all the time to be neglecting perhaps your own relations—to wish to reclaim all the waste lands, and to misuse your own tiny strip of garden.'

But here the conversation was abruptly ended, for at that minute Miss Claremont and Lucy came in armed with Dante and dictionaries, and Carlo said no more, but opening his copy of the *Inferno*, began, at Clare's request, to read to them.

## CHAPTER XXX

### BITTER-SWEET

'Thou Who hast Thyself  
Endured this fleshhood—knowing how, as a soaked  
And sucking vesture, it can drag us down  
And choke us in the melancholy Deep—  
Sustain me, that with Thee I walk these waves  
Resisting ! Breathe me upward, Thou in me  
Aspiring, Who art the Way, the Truth, the Life !—  
That no truth henceforth seem indifferent,  
No way to truth laborious, and no life—  
Not even this life I live—intolerable !'

'Aurora Leigh.'

In the grounds at Merlebank there stood a pretty little log-hut, fantastically built, and divided within into two rooms. It had

been the work of one of Mr. Britton's summer holidays many years ago, and had been specially built for the children. At first they had played in it incessantly, had learnt a fair amount of cookery with the help of the little stove in the outer room, and had found the place invaluable in all adventuring games wherein desert islands figured. But now they had rather outgrown this sort of thing, and 'Mavis Hut,' as it was called, served only for refreshments at garden-parties, for a convenient place to keep the lawn-tennis box, and occasionally for church decorations.

On the afternoon after the discussion with Carlo, Kate happened to be arranging the church vases in the inner room of Mavis Hut. She had been round the garden gathering the wet flowers, had taken all she wanted from the greenhouses, and now sat comfortably down to her work at the rough, wooden table, with the brass vases and the lovely red and white flowers all ready to hand.

She felt still a little sore at the implied rebuke in Carlo's words that morning, but she was too good and well-meaning to blind herself to the truth. He had given her, whether consciously or unconsciously, a home-thrust; and Kate, though she disliked him in consequence, fully admitted the justice of the remarks as applied to herself. She sighed a little as she arranged her vases, then finding her own failings no very pleasant study, she turned her thoughts back to Carlo himself. He puzzled her more and more, but though she would have liked to think him conceited, or priggish, or hypocritical, she could not do so; the worst she could say of him was that he was living a worthless life, and that he was an inconsistent sort of man. His absence of self-consciousness appealed to her strongly, however, because it was incomprehensible to her; and, though persuading herself that she despised and disliked him, she knew all the time in her secret heart that this was largely owing to her own perversity.

The sun had been shining brightly a few minutes before, but as Kate arranged her flowers she noticed that the summer-house grew dark, and was not surprised to hear before long a steady downpour of rain.

'I daresay it will be over before I have finished,' she thought to herself, and was going on with her work when, to her surprise, the door of the hut was opened, and Carlo walked into the outer room, evidently seeking shelter from the rain.

'What a bother!' thought Kate. 'But, after all, though I can see him through this crack in the woodwork, he can't see

me. I don't think I shall let him know I am here ; he would interrupt me, and perhaps talk again as he did this morning—and, besides, I dislike him !'

Hardly had she taken her resolution, when once more the outer door opened, and Francesca hurried in, wet and flushed.

'You here !' she exclaimed, in a voice so startled that Kate's attention was instantly arrested.

Carlo had been standing at one of the little lattice windows, watching the torrents of rain. She had not perceived him till she had closed the door behind her. He turned instantly. There was no time for thought. It was impossible that any recollection of Captain Britton or Anita should cloud that perfect moment. He was only conscious of two things—that Francesca was present, and that there was no longer the dreary necessity of behaving as though their love was non-existent.

'*Carina ! Carina mia !*' he cried, crossing the hut at lightning speed ; and the next moment Francesca was clasped in his arms.

All had passed so quickly that there had been no chance for poor Kate to make her presence known, and she sat now in the inner room petrified with astonishment. Her first thought was one of indignation, but when she saw that Francesca clung to her lover, sobbing pitifully, her heart was touched ; and though she told herself that she 'distinctly disapproved of this sort of nonsense,' she began to see that there must be something in the past of her cousin and Signor Donati of which she was unaware,—probably an undeclared love-story, well known to her father. What so likely as that he should have interested himself in the young Italian on this account, and himself have hastened Francesca's visit in the hope that the barrier between them—whatever it might be—would be removed ?

All this flashed through Kate's mind as she watched the two who stood but a few paces from her, and heard with unwilling ears the mingled love and grief so little intended for any outsider. Yet what could she do ? To leave the summer-house she must pass through the room in which they were talking—must not only put an end to the interview, but embarrass them past bearing.

Again, if she even moved a muscle, Carlo, with his preternaturally sharp hearing, would certainly notice it : she did not dare even to raise her hands to stop her ears, lest he should overhear the movement ; and so in sore vexation she remained an unwilling spectator of all that passed. True, when they spoke low and fast in Italian, she could not always follow them,

but very often they would suddenly relapse into English, and then every syllable could be heard through the thin wooden partition.

'Tell me,' said Carlo, when, after a time, they sat down on the rustic seat at the other end of the hut, Francesca's head drawn close down on his shoulder,—'tell me, darling, this one thing. Why did your father wish you to leave home? Mr. Britton showed me your letter to him, and you said——'

'Well, I didn't mean to have told you,' said Francesca, breaking in quickly; 'but it was this, Carlino. Count Carossa—the man who took Villa Bruno, you know—made father an offer of marriage for me, and that, of course, had to be declined, though father was vexed, and really wanted me to accept him. Then I had to speak, for I was afraid we should be constantly having such troubles; so I told him that though, of course, I would always obey him, and would consider my betrothal with you at an end, yet there was an inner sense in which it could never end for me, and I said all I dared to him about the future, yet could not move him. He doesn't see what a false position it puts me in—how hard it is to go out into the world, and keep people at a distance without being rude or prudish. Even Enrico Ritter at first was angry with me, because he thought I ought to have been able to freeze away the stupid men who will crowd round one at parties. Enrico is very good to me now, though; he is the one man worth speaking to in Naples, because he tells me when he has heard from you, and if you are well.'

'He writes to tell me when he has seen you,' said Carlo.

'It is only such a pity,' continued Francesca, 'that he is not Italian instead of German; then perhaps he would be a better talker and tell me more about you. He somehow gets in so little and stumbles so, and it is just as if I were starving and he were doling me out crumbs instead of bits of bread.'

'It is a shame to abuse the dear old fellow,' said Carlo, smiling; 'yet that is just what I have felt all these months with his letters. Perhaps, after weeks of waiting, I get one very long, very clever, very philosophical, and then in the post-script he will remark, "Miss Britton is all right; I saw her in the English church on Sunday." Not another word! If only Enrico could know what it means to be in love! And yet such crumbs are better than nothing. And he is the best and truest of friends.'

'Yes; there is something so staunch and faithful about him. Oh! he has been so good to me, especially once at a ball

when we overheard some wretches talking about you, and saying such horrid things of you.'

'What sort of things?'

'Oh, I can't tell you—hateful things about your reasons for going on the stage. You see people can't understand the real reason, and so I suppose they try to invent one. I can't think, Carlo *mio*, how you bear it so patiently; how you could let Kate lecture you this morning about your useless life, and never get even a little bit angry. You wouldn't have done it a year ago.'

'I am growing old, you see,' he answered, smiling, 'and that was nothing—nothing at all. I am a little sorry that I shock her, but you see it is inevitable.'

'And your sister, what of her? Are you happier about her? Have you learnt to understand each other better?'

He sighed.

'It is uphill work. Do you know that Comerio followed us to England?'

'No, Enrico never told me that; I suppose he thought I should not know anything about such a bad character.'

'He came to London when we were there in the winter. That has been the hardest part of it all; for I was beginning to knock up then, and all the time there was the horrible feeling that he was hovering over me like a vulture, only waiting for me to fall that he might pounce down.'

'That was what made you struggle on through that last opera,' said Francesca, wiping away her tears; 'Harry told me all about it the other day. But what happened? Did he take your place?'

Carlo signed an assent.

'He is there now.'

'How hard it must have been for you to be helpless! What torture to have to lie there ill and think about it all!'

'Yes; it was hard till one remembered that of course it might be all right, and then it was a great comfort to be able to try to get well. Besides, I have a great hope that Nita's little boy will prove a safeguard to her; she begins really to care for him. My one fear is that Comerio may manage to get round Merlino and induce him not to renew his contract with me in the summer. I know he will move heaven and earth to go to America with the Company and to get me turned off.'

'And Signor Merlino? What is he like? Do you dislike him so much as when you first saw him?'



'Do you know I have really grown fond of him. He is tyrannical, and has a bad temper, but I believe he honestly lives up to his lights. Now and then one gets out of heart with the whole concern, and then Merlino seems intolerable, but that has never been more than a passing mood with me.'

'And you don't think stage life so black as it is painted by my father, for instance?'

'No, I do not,' said Carlo; 'it is less morally trying than I fancied, but more physically tiring. However, I shall be well set up after this long rest. I have written to propose going back at the end of next week, or, if it fits in with their arrangements, on the following Monday.'

'So soon,' said Francesca, with a little sob. 'Oh, Carlino, I don't think you are strong enough; and it seems such a miserable, wandering life for you.'

'All life without you, *carina*, must be hard,' he said, stroking the crisp, brown hair from her forehead tenderly; 'my only comfort is in hoping and fighting for Nita's safety. You must not think of the mere discomforts of the life—they are nothing—less than nothing. Indeed, I frankly tell you that never have I suffered so terribly as in this idle time, with everything so comfortable and luxurious all around. It seemed impossible to be willing to live without you, to endure this separation any longer. But, then, no impossible order is ever given except by bad generals—there is comfort in that. It is not impossible, *carina*, and it must be done.'

'But I—I only have to stay at home; I can't even watch you fighting,' sobbed Francesca. 'That was always the fate of women. I have the wretched, easy life, and can only wonder and wonder what is happening to you. Oh, it is so hard! so hard!'

'Yes,' he said; 'it is the hardest lot. Yet, my own, you told me to go out; and even if you asked me, which I know you never would do, I could not now turn back.'

'Of course not,' she said, eagerly; 'you will go on, and in the end right must win. Perhaps they will no longer care for each other, or perhaps,—indeed, I try not to wish it exactly—Comerio might die, or——'

'Don't let us try to look on,' said Carlo, with a shudder. 'God helping me, I'll be faithful to death, but I can't manage more than a day at a time.' And see, my own, the sun is shining again and the rain is over. It is hard to say it, but I don't think we have any business to stay here longer. Your father might justly complain, and we will not give him cause to do that.'

She clung to him, while her tears rained down. Kate could not see her face, but the sunlight fell full upon his, revealing plainly the terrible struggle he was passing through. It was all she could do to keep from sobbing when this man, whom she had disliked, and half despised,—this man, whose life she had compared to the barren fig-tree, began to speak.

‘See; *carina*,’ he said, falling back to his native language, and speaking with the direct simplicity which is as rare as it is attractive; ‘God is so just—so fair—don’t you think He must be nearest those who suffer? We have to be separated, darling, but yet there is compensation for us both. We can surely trust Him with our lives—yes, and delight in that!’

‘But I can’t help being afraid for you,’ she sobbed; ‘you are so far away, and how can I tell what may be happening when that bad man hates you so, and wants to get rid of you?’

‘Yet it is often when we fear most that we learn not to fear,’ he said. ‘Oh, I remember so well the first time that came to me! I was about Gigi’s age; it was at the time of one of the earthquake panics, and I remember waking in an awful fright and trembling at the darkness and loneliness, then finding that there was One nearer than my mother, and that the house might fall or be swallowed up, yet He would be with us.’

What followed was inaudible to Kate, but presently through her tears she saw that after a long embrace they parted, that he held the door open for Francesca, and let her pass out into the sunshine alone, then shut himself in once more, and began to pace to and fro in agitation which alarmed her.

She saw how strong a restraint he must have put on himself while Francesca was present, but now the limits of endurance seemed to have passed; he could but let his wild grief drive him as it would. Kate held her breath for awe while he paced to and fro, pausing for a while with a groan, and resting his head on his upraised hands as they clutched for support at the rough, wooden wall, then once more pacing the little room faster and yet faster, till with a stifled cry he threw himself down on the ground, and broke into passionate sobbing and tears.

The waiting seemed terribly long to her; she tried not to look at him, and fixed her eyes on the red and white flowers in the altar-vases, but still each stifled sob fell on her ear; and she, who had ever deemed herself a model of self-control, found her tears streaming down merely for sympathy. She had never seen a man cry before; indeed, she had cherished the idea, common to most girls, that men never do cry. The sight

frightened her; it moved her strangely, and the relief was indescribable when at last he grew calmer.

Presently, with intervals between, came broken snatches of prayer, spoken always in Italian.

‘My God! it must be that since Thou hast shown me Thy will Thou wilt give me strength to do it.’

\* \* \* \* \*  
‘I know that Thou art stronger than these fiends that tear me.’

\* \* \* \* \*  
‘If I could but feel Thee near all would be light, but I am in darkness and torment—past feeling—past thinking.’

\* \* \* \* \*  
‘Yet the darkness is no darkness to Thee. Suffer me not to be false and selfish—a coward—a recreant!’

Again, after a long pause, the stillness of the hut was broken, but there was the dawning now of hope and triumph in his tone.

‘My Lord, I thank Thee that Thou wert no passionless angel here, but a man—a man tempted as I am tempted. By Thy victory, by Thy faith, by Thy perfect love, oh, Christ, save me now!’

Kate waited in cramped, painful stillness, half fearing, half hoping to hear more; but he did not say another word, and after a time rose to his feet, and crossed the hut to look at the weather. The sun was shining brightly; he stood by the window for some minutes, apparently in deep thought; then, with a sigh, glanced lingeringly round the little room, arranged his manifold wraps in the Italian fashion against which Kate had been wont to inveigh, and left the summer-house.

When his footsteps had died away in the distance Kate snatched up her vases and fled. School hours were not yet ended, and it was almost an unheard-of thing for her to go to the schoolroom during the younger sisters’ lessons; but she felt that for this Clare would forgive a breach of rules, and went boldly in with her request.

‘Clare,’ she said, breathlessly, ‘will you spare me ten minutes for something that will not wait?’

Miss Claremont looked up in surprise, but one glance at Kate’s face was enough for her; she rose directly, gave two or three brief directions to Molly and Flo, and followed Kate to her bedroom. As a girl, Kate had worshipped Miss Claremont; but she was now just at the time when the stage of worshipping one’s elders and betters is ended, and the stage of friendship

with them has hardly begun : there had been something not exactly amounting to a coolness between them for the last two years ; but Clare, though she was human enough to be a little grieved, had understood it all perfectly, and knew that in time Kate would need her again, and would fall back into the old loving confidence, with the friendship of a woman substituted for the extravagant worship of a girl.

'You are in trouble, dear?' she asked, sitting down on the sofa, with that air of being perfectly at leisure and not in the least hurried which was peculiar to her.

Not without many tears Kate told her story.

'And, oh, what can I do?' she sobbed. 'I have been an eavesdropper against my will ; but what ought I to do?'

'The whole story is such a complete surprise to me,' said Clare, slowly. 'You must leave me a minute or two to think. Poor children ! poor children ! It was natural enough ! I wonder the thought never crossed my mind ; but somehow I had always fancied quite a different love-story for Francesca, and I suppose that blinded me.'

'I know what you are thinking of,' said Kate. 'I, too, thought that she and Harry cared for each other ; and I used to be so jealous because he liked to be with her better than with me. Don't you remember that summer long ago, when you first came to live here?'

'Yes, I remember well,' said Clare. 'I suppose on his side it was a mere passing fancy, and on hers genuine cousinly liking, for she is exactly the same with him now. You understood that she had actually been betrothed to Carlo?'

'She said so, distinctly. I think it must have been broken off at the time he went on the stage, and that must clearly have been to save his sister from this Comerio. Oh, Clare ! the horrible part to me is that I've misjudged him so cruelly ! I can never forgive myself.'

'I suspected from the first that it was in order to be with his sister that he took to the stage,' said Clare. 'But I little thought what he had had to give up.'

'Oh, if you could have seen him !' said poor Kate, crying anew at the recollection of the scene she had witnessed. 'It was so terrible I can never forget it—I can never be the same again ! I used to think it grand to be above that sort of thing ; but I never knew till now what love meant.'

Clare was not sorry that Kate's theories as to the depravity of man were annihilated. She let her talk on, putting in a sympathetic word now and then.

'I can't think how he can have helped hating me when I lectured him on things I knew nothing about, and told him he was like Nero, and talked just as if my life were perfection and his life useless.'

'There is no pain so sharp as to find that we have misjudged another,' said Clare; 'and have blamed them when rather they should have been honoured and revered. But a sharp lesson like this stamps "Judge not" on one's heart as nothing else can: it is a lesson we most of us have had to learn, dear.'

'You don't think we ought to tell them that I was in the hut?'

'No; that could only make you all three very uncomfortable. I think you acted for the best in a very difficult position, and Carlo and Francesca may just as well keep all the comfort they can from that one interview; but I think it may be well to let your father know that we know.'

'There can be no doubt that he must have learnt the story at Naples,' said Kate. 'I should like him to know about this afternoon, it will make me feel less of a hypocrite; but I wish you would tell him, Clare.'

'I will, if you like, dear,' she answered.

'And do come down quickly to afternoon tea, for I don't know how I shall meet them as if nothing had happened,' said Kate.

'We will be quite punctual,' replied Clare. 'But I would not dread it too much; such things pass off more easily than you would fancy possible just now. Don't think of your own part in the matter at all, just put yourself in their place.'

Left to herself once more, Kate sat still musing. The strange and almost unprecedented insight she had gained that afternoon into the heart and life of another had altered her whole world. Through that revelation she saw everything in a new light, and the change bewildered her; she wanted time to think, for all her preconceived theories were overthrown; and though the actual sight of that struggle and victory had taught her more than thousands of sermons, or libraries of 'good books,' it had also sent her away with a crushing sense of her own shortcomings. Very honestly she sat and looked at her life. Her greatest wish had always been not to work among the respectable and humdrum poor, but to rescue the bad from lives of shame. She was constantly hankering after this particular work, and bitterly resented the assurance that she was too young to handle such subjects. Unluckily she was very intimate with some of those workers whose zeal outruns their

discretion, and who spoil their brave efforts by making untimely allusions to them—by dragging them into conversations at table or in the drawing-room, till the hearers can only wonder what has become of English reserve. A doctor discussing horrible diseases and their cure in his family would be loudly and universally condemned ; but those whose work it is to wage war on vice seem too often, in their eagerness, to think themselves justified in talking ‘shop’ in and out of season. Kate had moreover acquired the terrible failing which seems to be becoming more and more of a danger among the really good and earnest—she was so eager in wishing to fight the evil that she began to take a sort of indignant delight in tracing evil back to its source, particularly when any well-known character was involved. She took her excitement, not in reading the malicious gossip of society papers, but in discussing the latest scandal with the religious world. Yet nothing can be more certain than that social purity is never advanced by scandalmongering, albeit the scandal may have filtered through district-visitors and enthusiastic suppressors of vice.

This afternoon, in the light of the new revelation, Kate remembered with burning shame how angry she had been when two or three times she had tried to make inquiries as to the state of morals in theatrical life, and Carlo had courteously but firmly turned the conversation. She had accused him in her own mind of shuffling and evading the topic, had imagined everything bad of him ; and now she found that this very man who would not discuss the matter, and who had none of the surface enthusiasm of her friends, had quietly devoted his life to the work of saving one woman.

‘What is it that keeps him silent?’ she thought to herself. ‘And what is it that makes me love to talk? Is the silent work “golden”? Is the talk unwholesome? Yet “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” There can be no harm in it then. No, that won’t hold, though! because our hearts ought to be full of what we want to save them to, not what we want to save them from. And yet we can’t very well talk of that side, or people would think it was all cant. That is an odd thing about Carlo Donati, he never seems afraid that people may think he is talking cant ; I do believe he goes right on without thinking what people think of him at all. I fancy it is that he has no conceit, and that I have a great deal ; he does things quietly, and I with a fuss and a flourish. Who would have dreamt that with his

quiet, easy way of going on, and all the time he was singing, and reading, and talking to us, he was living through such a fierce struggle ! Oh, what a goose,—what a goose I have been ! How hateful and contemptible to be afraid he was in love with me, when it was merely thinking of Francesca that made him look like that ! And I have been snubbing him, and looking down on him, and talking such nonsense about him to Francesca herself ! How they must despise me !’

With relief she turned, as Clare had advised her, from the thought of herself to the thought of her cousin and of Carlo. Hitherto she had considered Francesca to be very charming, very innocent, very reprehensibly idle ; one of those girls who did not take up ‘parish work,’ and who were deserving of mingled pity and blame. Now she asked herself honestly whether she could, in Francesca’s position, have given up all so bravely. And Madame Merlino, from all she had gathered about her from various sources, was no ‘interesting case,’ but a very ordinary, commonplace, ill-tempered person, who as yet apparently was far from grateful for the sacrifice which had cost the lovers so much.

‘For some charming, delightful person who cared for me I might have done it,’ thought Kate ; ‘but for one of those women like Madame Merlino, who just get into danger because they are weak and foolish, who are dull, and uninteresting, and heartless,—no, I could never have done it ! Never !’

Again she went back to her recollections of that scene in the hut. What was it that had given Carlo power to choose this hard, ‘distasteful life ? Why had he been able to leave Francesca, and bear shame and loss, and grief ? It was not that his love for her was less keen than the love of other men ; on the contrary, the passionate fervour of his love had terrified Kate, had transcended all her dreams of what love in the best of men might mean.

It must be because he was trying with all his might, trying continuously, to live the Christ-life, which most of us do spasmodically, and not with the whole force of our nature ; because his faith was perfect trust in One who was stronger than the darkness, the danger, the misery which overwhelmed him ; One whom he knew and loved ; One whom he desired above all things to serve with the free devotion of a man, not the grudging submission of a slave. It was clearly a faith which was independent of his feelings, independent of his intellect, independent of his surroundings ; he had owned himself past feeling and past thinking ; he had been overwhelmed

with the temptations of that valley of the shadow of death, yet all the time had held unshaken to the one fact, which he knew as he knew his own identity—'Thou art with me!'

The clock striking five recalled her to the necessity of going downstairs, and of getting through as best she might the dreaded meeting.

'It serves me right,' she thought to herself sadly. 'I have been conceited and patronising, have looked on everything and spoken of everybody as from a superior height, and now I learn that I have been taking false, distorted views, and have to begin life all over again.'

The loss of her old self-confidence was no pleasant sensation, however salutary it might be; she entered the drawing-room apprehensively, and hardly knew whether to feel relieved or disappointed when she found Carlo bending over his copy of Verdi's *Ernani*, and looking exactly as usual. Perhaps she had not expected to see him bearing a long face, or an expression of conventionally pious resignation, but yet it astonished her to find that after passing through so much a man could in two hours' time so completely have regained control over look, and voice, and manner.

'I shall quite miss this delightful English institution of kettledrum,' he remarked, pushing aside his book, and as usual coming forward to help her. 'I'm afraid nothing would make it fit in, though, with the hours we have to keep.'

A great lump rose in Kate's throat as she remembered how foolish and disagreeable she had been to him on the day when Francesca's letter had arrived, and had made him so absent-minded.

'And tea, I suppose, is not good before singing,' she replied, putting forth the first platitude that came into her head.

'No,' he said, with a smile which was wholly pleasant, and had no suspicion of sarcasm. 'There are a few things which must be renounced even by the Neros who fiddle while Rome is burning!'

The genuinely humorous look in the eyes which but a little while ago she had seen full of tears, touched Kate, she felt half choked, and her usually ready words faltered.

'I want to beg your pardon for saying that,' she began, hesitatingly; 'I don't really know anything about stage life,—I—I—' (the admission was hard to make) 'have never even been inside a theatre; only somehow one gets into the way of picking up other people's notions and echoing them without



really finding out the truth. I had no right to say such a thing, I hope you will forgive me.'

His warm-hearted, Italian reception of the apology a little overwhelmed her, and she was glad that the entrance of Clare and the girls made the talk more general.

'The English seem to have a rooted idea that an actor must be a dangerous sort of fellow, and they generally look askance at a foreigner,' said Carlo. 'I don't think there are many Merlebanks ready to befriend fog-stricken singers, and I assure you I have become well accustomed to being regarded as a sort of dynamite, to be kept at a safe distance.'

'The effect of Puritan traditions,' said Clare. 'But there is certainly something in the argument that now the stage is so greatly improved the attitude towards it ought to be changed. I am not sure, Carlo, that in the end you may not convert me.'

'It is not I who ought to convert you, but the many English actors and actresses now living, who by their noble efforts to raise the drama, and by their own pure and upright lives, give the lie to the old view which the Puritans were no doubt quite warranted in holding. Or, if you will not be converted by the living, at least study the lives of the dead; think of such a man as Phelps, such a woman as your Mrs. Siddons!'

The talk was interrupted by an abrupt question from Molly,—

'What can have become of Francesca? I never knew her late for tea before.'

Kate felt herself colouring, but was relieved when Carlo quietly turned off the remark.

'Don't you think she may be finishing her sketch in the church?' he said.

'Oh, yes,' said Molly, quite satisfied, 'and perhaps she will stay on and hear them practise the anthem for to-morrow. It is our yearly festival to-morrow, you know. By the bye, Kate, have you done the vases?'

'Yes,' said Kate, snatching up a biscuit, and crossing the room to feed Bevis, that her burning cheeks might not attract notice.

Francesca did not appear till dinner-time. Kate glanced at her then apprehensively, and saw that she had not been nearly so successful as Carlo in getting rid of all traces of her emotion. It must have been patent to any one with eyes in his head that she had been crying; and Harry, with the inconvenient candour which cousins and brothers often exhibit, commented across the table on her appearance.

'Why, Francesca, you look dreadfully tired. Has Kate been showing you all the harrowing sights in her district, or telling you of the horrors of the Ashborough slums?'

She blushed and faltered; Kate longed helplessly to come to her rescue, but before she could think of a single thing to say, Carlo had dashed recklessly into the conversation, not at all troubling himself about his matter or his manner, but only desirous to turn the subject somehow, and save Francesca from embarrassment.

'To slum!' he exclaimed quickly, catching at the last word; 'that is your new English verb, just invented, is it not? I was told in London that slumming had become a fashion. Is it so at Ashborough, too?'

'Not quite so much; the old houses in Ashborough are notorious for being infested with a particular kind of vermin, to which the fashionable have a mortal antipathy. I don't think it is likely to become very popular here to slum.'

By this time Kate had recovered her presence of mind, and bravely kept the ball going, Clare helping her adroitly, and the lovers feeling relieved that all had been so well tided over. Kate was conscious all through the evening that Carlo was shielding Francesca from observation, talking more than usual to cover her silence, carrying Harry off to sing when he was making his way to the shady corner of the drawing-room where she had ensconced herself, and skilfully contriving to lead the conversation round to cards by volunteering to show them some Italian tricks, from which they somehow glided naturally into a rubber.

'He is managing us all,' thought Kate to herself, admitting that the sensation was novel; 'but it is for Francesca's sake; he does not seem to think about himself. How will he dispose of me, I wonder?'

She was not left long in doubt, for at that minute he turned to her.

'You have no class this evening?' he inquired. 'Then I wish you would play us once more those *Kinderscenen* of Schumann's which you played the other night.'

'Yes, Kate, do play,' urged Harry; 'I always get on better at whist with music going.'

Whereupon, Carlo began to tell them a story which he had once heard of a gambler's wife, whose miserable lot it was every evening to sit at the piano, where, in a mirror, she could see the hands of her husband's dupes, and reveal to him by her playing what cards they held.

While he talked he had been finding her music for her, then, with one swift glance towards the quiet corner where Francesca sat with her needlework, he went back to the card-table.

Kate could see him from where she sat, and as she played on dreamily, musing over that strange afternoon, and watching Carlo's untroubled face, she said to herself again and again, 'I have been a fool! a fool! He is the bravest man I ever met, and the best!'

Miss Claremont told all to Mr. Britton that evening, and it was agreed that when she could find a good opportunity she should allow Carlo to see that she knew about his betrothal and its abrupt ending. A few words spoken by Mr. Kavanagh, the doctor, after his final visit to Carlo the next morning, made her doubly desirous to talk the whole matter over with him, and she was not sorry that the festival evening proved too cold and damp for him to risk going to church, so that he was left quite alone, and gladly accepted her invitation to come and chat comfortably over the schoolroom fire.

'This sort of life is very spoiling,' he said, throwing himself back in an arm-chair with the easy grace which characterised all his movements, and glancing round the delightfully snug, homelike room. 'I can't think what it is that you English people do to your houses; there is a charm about them one does not seem to get elsewhere.'

'I wish you could have seen a little more of English home-life,' said Clare. 'If only you had been strong enough there are several people about here whom I should have liked you to meet.'

'It is better not, perhaps,' he replied; 'I should only grow discontented with the life I shall have to go back to, and feel the contrast all the more between houses like this and the dingy lodging-houses and third-rate hotels which we have to frequent.'

'It must be a wretched life, wandering from place to place,' she said.

He sighed a little.

'There are a few discomforts, but, after all, they are but trifles. No; what I shall feel most is the going away from this home where all is congenial; away from all of you who can talk well on every subject under the sun; you who have so many interests, and who read and think. Some people do not seem to feel the atmosphere they live in, but to me it makes all the difference; it is stimulating to live in a household like this, and to be with a man like Mr. Britton; and it is depressing to live perpetually with people who take little interest in anything

outside their own profession, and to hear nothing but gossip and stage talk.'

'Then they are not very highly educated, I suppose, the members of Signor Merlino's Company?'

'No, except as regards music. Of course, you know, I am not a bit intellectual myself, and am nothing of a reader; but, all the same, I breathe better in this sort of atmosphere, perhaps merely because it is what I was accustomed to at home. If it were not for Sardoni, who is witty and clever, I don't know how I should bear the monotony of it. Sometimes I would give anything to be older and cleverer; many men would be able to alter the atmosphere,—Enrico Ritter, for instance, with his brains and his power as a talker, might work a revolution in the green-room.'

Clare could have smiled at the notion of Enrico's gaining more real influence by his ready tongue than Carlo by his fascinating character and unselfish life, but she would not for the world have said anything which, even for a moment, could have broken the unconscious simplicity that was one of his great charms.

'I suppose Signor Sardoni is your only friend?' she said.

'Oh! he is a sort of brother to me, but many of them are my friends. That is one thing which makes up for many other shortcomings in stage life—the wonderful good-nature. I can't tell you how good-natured most of them have been to me, though I came among them as a novice, and am by far the youngest in the Company.'

'I had always heard that there is so much jealousy in professional life.'

'Well, that is true, too. There are jealousies and quarrels, but then so there are in private life; and nowhere in private life, setting aside Merlebank, have I met with such real, genuine kindness as from men like Sardoni, and Caffieri, and Marioni,—indeed from almost all of them.'

'Do you know I was talking this morning to Mr. Kavanagh?' said Clare. 'I am such an old friend that I hope you will forgive me for meddling.'

'My best nurse has certainly the first right to interview the doctor,' said Carlo, smiling. 'I like Mr. Kavanagh, though he seems rather inclined to think that everything must give way to the supreme duty of minding your own health. He reminds me of Marioni, who is so wrapped up in his profession that if the world were turned topsy-turvy he would only wonder what the effect would be on Italian opera.'

'Mr. Kavanagh tells me he is a little afraid you do not quite understand his English.'

'That is either a libel on his pronunciation or on my intellect. I understand him perfectly.'

'He said,' continued Clare, 'that he did not think you could have grasped his meaning to-day after he had been sounding you, because you seemed hardly to bestow a thought on the matter, though he told you that this continuous public singing would either kill you or cure you. Did you gather that from what he said?'

'Yes, I did. He told me there was no disease of the lungs, but a slight delicacy, and that using my voice in this way would be a case of kill or cure. Of course I hope for the cure, but if the other thing comes, why there is no more to be said. A singer may as fitly die in harness as any other man.'

'But do you really mean to run so grave a risk? Life is surely a gift not to be treated lightly! Are you wise to try the sharp American winter, the long journeys, the singing, which you are told is a doubtful experiment?'

'It must seem stupid and headstrong to you, I am afraid, and I can't altogether explain it; but if what you believed to be your duty called you one way, and the care of your health called you another, I think you would agree that health must go to the wall.'

'I want to tell you,' began Clare, a little nervously, 'that I have just learnt the true facts of the case. Mr. Britton, as you know, knew much and guessed the rest; and I hope, Carlo, you will not be vexed that I, too, should know about it. It was very blind of me never to have seen how matters were with you and Francesca.'

'You really know about that?' he exclaimed, with relief. 'Then we can talk quite plainly. I am glad that you know, more glad than I can tell you. I have longed to talk to you about it all these weeks. And then, too, you will be such a comfort to Francesca. You will take care of her next week—when I am gone.'

His voice shook, and Clare felt the tears starting to her eyes for sympathy.

'You told me that you promised your mother to be with Madame Merlino,' she said; 'but if she had known all that the promise would cost you, do you think she would have wished you to keep it?'

'Perhaps not; but I don't see that one can get any sort of guidance out of that. It is not because I made the promise

that I must go on with the life, but because I know it to be right—know that I am called to do it.'

'I suppose it would not have been possible to induce your sister to leave the stage?'

'No. Her husband would never have consented to it for one thing; and then, even if she had done so, there would have been nothing to prevent Comerio from ending his engagement with Merlino, and following her wherever she chose to settle down. There was no way but this—there is no way.'

'Such a case is surely a heavy indictment against theatrical life,' said Clare.

'Do you think so? That seems to me hardly just. A scandal connected with the stage is in everyone's mouth, but the sins of private people are hushed up and kindly forgotten, though there is not really more immorality among us than among them. If an actress loses her reputation you hear of it, because she has to live in the "fierce light" of public life, and so you come to think that we are worse than the other professions. However, I feel with you, that Nita would probably have been safer and happier had she been brought up in a home like this, for instance, and had married in private life. Such a brave, noble woman as Domenica Borelli, or any woman capable of taking care of herself, may well become an actress if that is her true vocation. If she is not able to take care of herself, and is yet unable to retire from the stage, why then her husband, or father, or brother must do all he can to shield her.'

Clare was silent for some minutes; it was very hard to withstand the mingled humility and self-reliance which seemed so strangely blended in Carlo's character. He was a man who listened to advice and suggestion with the patience and deference of a child, but when once convinced of the right nothing could shake him; and she knew that it was his genuine goodness which gave him this power, the fearless faith which she had long ago noticed as the strong point in his nature, and which during all these years had been strengthening and developing. Young as he was, he seemed to her indeed well fitted to be poor Nita's champion, even while in her heart she longed to persuade him to turn back, blinded by her love for him and for Francesca.

The thought of Mr. Kavanagh's words returned to her with so keen a pang that to be silent was impossible.

'Yet surely,' she urged, 'there is a noble mistake which

you may be falling into—an exaggerated self-sacrifice, a needless throwing away of life and happiness? After all, you know, the command is to love our neighbours *as ourselves*.'

'Do you quite think that?' he said. 'I thought it was now, "Love one another as I have loved you." It ought not to be as impossible as it seems to live out that rule.'

He sighed, because he remembered that a few weeks ago the struggle had been to endure the being laid aside, while now his heart sided with Clare, and he only longed to be able to think her arguments right.

'You must recollect how ill you have been,' she continued. 'It is true you have recovered wonderfully fast, but it was a very severe attack of pleurisy; it seems to me that you ought to think very seriously indeed before venturing on the Western winter. And even if your health stands the life, it is so miserable for you; I can't bear to think that you should have to go on with it year after year.'

As she spoke, a vision of his future life rose before him. He thought of the monotonous gossip of the green-room, the perpetual bustle and confusion, the manifold packings and unpackings, the desolate lodgings, the long journeys; he thought of the insults of Gomez, the ill-temper of Merlino, the stinging words and cold manner of Anita, the unwelcome love and admiration of sentimental women, and, above all, of the daily martyrdom of separation from Francesca. His heart sank down like lead.

'It is humiliating to be such a creature of moods,' he said; 'last night I had got to the point of being content and even happy to have been called out to battle, and here I am hankering after love, and home, and peace again. Man is a contradictory animal, Clare!'

'If you are sure—quite sure—that you are choosing rightly, I will not say a word,' she replied. 'But you and Francesca are very dear to me, and I can't bear to think that you may be throwing away your life on a hopeless task, and bringing such a terrible grief to her. She is so young and fragile, so little fitted to bear great sorrow.'

He tried to speak, but his voice failed him; he pushed back his chair and took several turns up and down the room, then returned to the fireside and stood with his elbows on the mantelpiece and his head in his hands.

'You see, Carlo,' she resumed, 'I can't help wishing Francesca to have the happiest life, and though I would be the last to say that a single woman may not be extremely

happy and useful, yet it does no good to blink the fact that her life is incomplete. You will think it strange that a very happy old maid of fifty should speak like this, but Fanny Kemble's words are very true,—“Those who are alone must learn to be lonely ;” and we old people, who know how hard that is, shrink from the thought of the young ones setting out on the rough road by which we have travelled.’

‘Clare, for God’s sake say no more!’ he exclaimed, turning towards her a face so full of anguish that she sorely regretted her words. ‘I must not turn back like a coward, even for love of her ; but it is hard—so fearfully hard—when the very saints of the earth tempt one! And that she should have to suffer—that seems so unjust,—so intolerable!’

She signed to him to sit down on the sofa beside her, and looked with her quiet, shining eyes into his troubled ones.

‘Francesca will not think that intolerable ; to share your pain will be her comfort. And since you are called to make this choice which will bring shadow on both your lives, why then I have nothing more to say. Once sure of God’s will we need not trouble about the rest.’

‘And if I choose my own will now, why, I should not be fit to make Francesca happy,’ he said, musingly. ‘Sometimes, Clare, it seems to me that the Donati are fated to give their lives for a forlorn hope.’

Clare mused over the well-known story of the two patriots. They had been called to give up home, and love, and at last life itself, to save their country from tyranny ; the third Donati seemed to be called to give up home, and love, and possibly life also, to save one soul from sin. It was a less picturesque lot, but who would dare to say that it was lower?

‘It is strange,’ she said at length ; ‘but your very name means, “A given man.”’

‘Does Carlo mean “man”? I never knew that before.’

He fell into deep thought, and Clare noticed that his face gradually resumed its usual expression.

‘After all,’ he said, presently, ‘it does seem strange that we should eternally be slipping back to a short-sighted selfishness. Betweenwhiles, one can only wonder at the fuss one makes over sorrow, and then comes a slight change in weather, or health, or people, or devils, and the struggle begins all over again. I see there is some truth in Captain Britton’s accusation,—we Italians do love pleasure and ease, and do cordially detest storm and strife.’

‘Dear boy, I think English people are much the same!’



said Clare, laughing. Then growing grave again, 'But tell me, Carlo, is there nothing I can do for you? Since I can't see you as happy as I should wish, let me at least have some little way of helping you.'

He took her hand in his courtly Italian fashion and kissed it.

'It is thinking what you have made of life, Clare, that will help us most,' he said.

She coloured, and her eyes filled with tears.

'To be able to talk to you and write to you freely will be a comfort to Francesca, and do you think, Clare, you would sometimes write to me?'

'Of course I will,' she replied warmly.

'Thank you, that will be something to look forward to. You see it is rather dreary to have no belongings in the world. Enrico Ritter is my only correspondent; for, though my old Maestro writes every now and then, he confines himself strictly to his one subject.'

At that moment they were interrupted by one of the extraordinary coincidences which afford subject-matter to the Society for Psychological Research.

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## CHAPTER XXXI

### A NEW PROPOSAL

'Choose well; your choice is  
Brief and yet endless.'—GOETHE.

'Two gentlemen to see you, sir,' announced the servant, advancing with a visiting-card on the salver.

Carlo having just given out that he had no belongings in the world, wondered who could possibly have arrived at this time in the evening to see him, and while the footman crossed the schoolroom had had time to wonder whether Merlino and Sardonì might, for some reason, need him; whether it could be a plot of Comerio's; whether Uncle Guido had at last relented and come to seek him out and make up their quarrel.

To his utter astonishment he read on the card the name of 'Piale.'

'Now, of all extraordinary things, that the dear old Maestro should come here just as I was speaking of him!' he exclaimed.

‘And the other? He sent in no card? Is he young, light-haired, German-looking?’

‘No, sir,’ replied the servant, ‘middle-aged and looked like an English gentleman. He gave no card, sir.’

Carlo’s hope that possibly Enrico might have come over with Piale faded away, and asking Clare to excuse him he went down quickly to the drawing-room, where with one swift glance he perceived a stranger, tall, thin, business-like, evidently English, and dear old Piale himself, with his thick bush of grizzled hair, his parchment-like skin, and his eager, fiery eyes.

The warmth of the greeting between master and pupil must have amused the stranger; but perhaps he was well used to demonstrative foreigners, for the business-like air never forsook him for an instant as he watched the face and figure of the young Italian. By the time he had thoroughly scrutinised him, had taken in his various merits and defects, had glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and at the open piano, the two friends remembered his presence, and Piale, with pride and emotion, said, as he turned towards him,—

‘There, sir! now let me introduce to you my best pupil—not looking so much the worse for his illness as I had feared!’

‘I had the pleasure of hearing Signor Donati several times in town last winter,’ said the Englishman, pleasantly; ‘and am glad to make his acquaintance.’

‘And your voice, my son?’ said Piale, eagerly—‘it has really not suffered, you think?’

‘It seems all the better for the rest,’ said Carlo; ‘and I hope to be at work again in a week’s time.’

‘Let me hear you!’ said Piale. ‘Come! what will you sing to me? “*Il balen*”? “*Largo al factotum*”? What have we here? *Carmen*! Are you studying that?’

‘Yes; we are to give it in America this autumn.’

‘Let me hear what you make of the Toreador’s song!’ said the Maestro, seating himself at the piano.

‘But you are tired with your journey,’ suggested Carlo. ‘You say you have travelled night and day. Let me come over to-morrow to Ashborough and sing to you there.’

‘Bah!’ exclaimed Piale, with a snort of contempt. ‘Am I to find more refreshment in eating or drinking or sleeping than in music, my friend?’

And with an expression of intense satisfaction he thundered out the introduction to the song, while Carlo obediently braced himself up to sing, anxious as ever to please the autocratic old

man, but a little nervous about attempting this particular song, which he had only studied by himself, and slightly troubled by speculations as to the English stranger and Piale's hurried journey. Once before the Maestro had plotted against him, and he could not help fancying that the stranger had something to do with a possible engagement.

All this faded, however, the instant he began to sing. Piale's accompaniment was exhilarating. For the first time he began to feel that he was Escamillo, and his rendering of the song brought a look of perfect serenity over the Maestro's face, and drew forth hearty exclamations of 'Bravo! bravo!' from the business-like Englishman.

He had hardly returned to himself and ceased to be the Toreador, when both visitors beset him, Piale with an impetuous gust of words, the stranger with more eagerness of manner than might have been expected of an Englishman. He listened half bewildered to the proposal, only taking in by degrees that the stranger was a well-known London manager, that he was offering him an immediate engagement, precisely the engagement which would most advance his professional career,—that the terms were higher than anything he had ever dreamed of attaining to, that they made his weekly pittance in Merlino's Company seem more than ever scanty and insufficient. As in a dream, he listened to the praises heaped on him—to the assurances that he would be the lion of the London season, that already his appearance was eagerly awaited, since, even in the unsuccessful winter performances, and with health, and weather, and surroundings against him, he had made his mark in the musical world. For a minute he was dazzled by the brilliant prospects held out before him. Fame, a rapid and striking success, wealth and ease, thoroughly competent fellow-artistes, the London world at his feet, and his future assured,—what wonder if such a glowing possibility should for a minute attract him! And attract him it did." He longed for it as a few hours before he could not have believed it possible that he should have longed for anything having no connexion with Francesca. It seemed to him impossible to turn from this bright future to the dismal drudgery in the provinces with Merlino, the poverty, and hard work, and scant sympathy. He was young, and longed for happiness—an artist, and longed to bring his art to its highest perfection under the best conditions—a human being, and appreciation was cheering, and lack of recognition depressing.

But, for all that, above the eager representations of Piale

and the London manager, and above his own personal craving for this new life, he could distinctly hear the inner voice, which had never failed him, repeating again and again, 'Remember Anita! She has no one but you! Be faithful!'

Long before he had ended the struggle, came the necessity of making some sort of reply to the offer, but no one ever passed through a temptation and found all the time he desired for preparation. Every inch of the ground had to be contested, and even in his courteous thanks there was an unusual amount of hesitation, which the London manager put down to diffidence and inexperience. Piale, however, knowing him better, began to fear that it boded a refusal.

'You are not strong enough for the drudgery of a travelling Company,' he exclaimed. 'Everything points to your accepting this offer.'

Carlo looked at him a trifle reproachfully, and his manner became less diffident and his words more to the point.

'The offer is indeed a very tempting one,' he said; 'but I fear I must refuse it. You see, sir, Merlino is my brother-in-law, and my engagement with him—though it may be ended next month, if either of us wishes it to be ended——'

The manager interrupted him.

'But the mere fact that the Impresario is your brother-in-law is surely in your favour. He would be interested in your success—would wish you to seize on this opportunity, which may be turned to very good account, I assure you.'

Carlo gave Piale a glance which said as plainly as words, 'See what a difficulty you have landed me in!'

The Maestro responded to it by a suggestion which relieved his conscience, and proved of some use to Carlo.

'Take a few hours to think it all over,' he suggested. 'I will come and see you again about it to-morrow.'

'That is not a bad idea,' said the manager. 'But I must beg for a final answer to-morrow morning, for Metasti has failed me suddenly, and we are in great need of a baritone. If you refuse—but you'll not refuse, I hope. Signor Piale, you must talk him over!'

And after a little friendly banter, and a few skilfully-framed compliments, the manager rose to go, shaking hands cordially with Carlo.

'And I shall hope soon to number you in my Company!' were his parting words.

'Don't on any account come to the door!' said Piale, excitedly. 'The damp night—your throat!—for Heaven's sake

take care of your throat ! And to-morrow I shall come over to receive your definite acceptance—nothing less, mind—a definite acceptance—or, *diavolo* ! I shall think you have gone clean demented !’

For the greater part of that night Carlo fought the terrible craving that had seized him to accept the London offer. He was ashamed to find how ardently he longed for all that the manager had suggested ; while Piale’s assurance that he was not strong enough for the hard work in Merlino’s Company had in it a truth which made it doubly dangerous. It was to be a case of kill or cure—the doctor had told him as much ; and though at first the idea had not in the least shaken his purpose, yet now that he was alone, with all around him dark and still, he began to consider the two possibilities.

There was that glowing picture of life and success which the London manager had painted. In imagination he lived through the inspiring reception, the artistic triumph ; he thought of Piale’s delight ; he began even to fancy that, to crown all, it would prove indeed that ‘nothing succeeds like success,’ and that Captain Britton would at last be won over, would join in the general homage, and see that after all a son-in-law on the operatic stage was not a man to be despised. He was human and very young, and for a while he revelled in this thought.

Then, in sharp contrast, he saw another picture.

He was back in Merlino’s Company, toiling through the familiar round of operas, overworked, underpaid—doing, as Sardonì put it, the ‘dirty work’ of the troupe ; his voice gradually failing, till he had sunk below the level even of Fasola, and had to content himself with the minor parts ; and so on through a weary indefinite time ; till at last, left behind by his companions in some far-away American hotel or hospital, he died alone among strangers, with no one near him who could even understand his native tongue.

To be killed by his work ! When looked at in this fashion—when seen in detail—it was no attractive prospect ! At four-and-twenty no healthy man can contemplate death without a strong natural repugnance ; the mere ‘lust of finishing’ chains him to this world where his work has but just begun. The old whose work seems ended, or the young whose bodies are worn out by disease, may naturally long to die : but Carlo was not worn out either mentally or physically ; he was at the threshold of life ; and notwithstanding all he had been through, life looked beautiful and desirable, and death dark and unattractive.

Whether right or wrong, these were his feelings, and he could not alter them in order to fit in with the ideas of the religious world.

And yet, without direct disobedience to his orders, he must choose the hard course and refuse the easy one. Tossing miserably to and fro, he wondered whether his whole life was to be like this; wondered whether everyone had this hard wrestling with temptation; wondered how it was that most men seemed to drift along so comfortably. Did they all the time wage an unseen warfare like this? Or was he naturally more selfish and indolent? Or had the devil a special spite against him?

Then, in the midst of his questionings, there floated back to him the familiar words, 'Men are not more willing to live the life of the Crucified.'

Willing to live the life, indeed! Why, he had forgotten all about it! Had been thinking of a life of ease, and glory, and pleasure; had had his own interests in view, not the interests of other people; had consulted his own will, not the will of the All-Father. Slowly the ruling power of his life resumed its sway over him; and then, tired out with all he had gone through, he fell asleep from very exhaustion.

When he woke the night was over, the sun was shining, the thrushes and blackbirds were singing, the rooks were cawing, and by the light of the early morning he could see the familiar picture of the Constant Shepherd. The night of temptation was over, too, the darkness had passed, and what he had to do was as clear as day to him; moreover, he knew that he could do it.

He must definitely decline the London offer. He must not, as he was half tempted to do, mention it to Merlino, by way of inducing him to renew his engagement at once or to raise his salary. If he did this Merlino's suspicions might be roused; his brother-in-law would certainly wonder what prompted him to refuse so good an offer. Then, when Piale came over that day, he must beg him to mention Comerio to the London manager; he must move heaven and earth to procure for his rival the offer which he had declined. To say that he liked doing this would be untrue. It was undeniably bitter to him, but he saw that it would safely dispose of Comerio during the summer; and, moreover, he wished to be just, even to his enemy, and since he had been the means of ending one engagement for Comerio, it seemed but fair that he should do his best to help him when opportunity offered.

He found, however, that Piale hardly understood this view

of the case, and his interview with the Maestro was stormy. In the end, however, Piale had to submit to the inevitable; and with a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders, owned that he could not stand against the folly of a man who had no eye to his own interests, and who deliberately threw away the very ticket which would have brought him a prize in the world's lottery.

He stayed to lunch at Merlebank, and diverted the Brittons very much by the mingled fondness and ferocity with which he seemed to regard his pupil. He tried to win them over to sympathy with his disappointment; and it transpired that the instant he had heard of Metasti's illness, he had hurried to London to see if he could not obtain the engagement for his pupil.

'But, you see, he is bent on his own destruction,' concluded the old man, with a gesture of impatience. 'One might as well try to argue with a mule! However, my son, since you are set on going to America, let me give you one piece of advice—beware of damp beds; take my advice, and always sleep between the blankets.'

Carlo made a gesture of horror.

'Now, dear Maestro, you really expect me to be too self-denying!'

'Self-denying, indeed! why, yes, the life of an opera-singer is one eternal practice of self-denial!' said Piale, gesticulating with his knife and fork.

Carlo laughed lightly.

'And I do my best to be your very good pupil, but at hotel blankets I draw the line!'

Francesca and Clare did all they could to talk the old man into a good humour, and to console him under his disappointment; and when Carlo parted with him at the Ashborough station, he was not at all sure that it was not emotion which made his answers so curt and his voice so gruff.

'You will not forget about Comerio?' he pleaded, at the very last moment.

Piale replied only by a grunt. But there was nothing but affection in his parting glance; and apparently he must have conciliated the London manager, and spoken in high terms of Comerio, for in three days' time Carlo received the following letter from Sardoni:—

'DEAR VAL,

'Our worthy Comerio has fallen on his feet, and has obtained the height of his ambition—an engagement for the London season. Lucky is he who deserveth nothing! By

what rule of philosophy or religion do you explain such an event? However, it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. We shall be quit of him, and—Heaven be praised!—this is the last week I shall have to keep an eye on him by day and share dressing-rooms with him by night. Your costumes are already being taken in and up; Comerio growled not a little at the nuisance of having them all refitted when he first came back. He remains in Merlino's good books, and has been fishing hard for America in the autumn; but when anything goes wrong it scores one to you, for the Impresario always swears that it would never have happened had you been in the Company. We go to Brighton on Whit-Sunday, and open the next day with *Faust*. It is supposed that the Whitsuntide holidays may make the thing a success; I have my doubts. However, with you as Valentino it may be. Write and tell me whether you come back on the Sunday or Monday, and I will meet you at the station. Monday will be all right, if you don't want to call a special rehearsal after the pleurisy; but as I'm sure you could do Valentino in your sleep, I don't see that we need be bothered with that. If you are at the Vicarage, you might mention that we sail in September, and that I could spare a few days in August if they would like it. Gigi sends affectionate messages by the yard. He talks of little else but your return.

‘Ever yours,

‘SARDONI.’

Once again Carlo and Francesca kept their Whitsuntide together. It had fallen earlier than on the previous year, and it was no small comfort to Carlo that his last day at Merlebank should have chanced to be that quiet Sunday, when he was able to walk through the sunny grounds to church with Francesca, and later in the day to have a long quiet talk with her as to the future. Of Mr. Kavanagh's kill-or-cure verdict he would not allow her to hear a word; she was quite anxious enough about him already, and Clare agreed with him that there was no need to mention it. But the doctor's verdict troubled kind-hearted Mr. Britton; and when on the Monday morning the carriage was announced and all the family met together in the hall to wish Carlo good-bye, he watched with deep sympathy the silent handshake that passed between the lovers. They both tried so bravely to keep up appearances, that Mr. Britton was touched with compassion and drew Francesca aside into his study. If the work should indeed prove too much for Carlo, Francesca would never see him again. He



would at least give them the comfort of a less public farewell ; the Captain might possibly be vexed, but Mr. Britton was willing to risk something for the niece who was almost as dear to him as his own children.

'Donati,' he said, 'just come in here one minute, will you?' then, closing the door after Carlo, he gave him a little push on the shoulder, indicating that he should go across to Francesca.

Carlo did not speak, but he gave his host a grateful look, and Mr. Britton kindly turned his back on them and began to make hay in the papers on his table, to unlock a drawer with a most unusual rattling of his keys, and to behave as a kind-hearted uncle should behave under the circumstances. Presently, crossing the room, he opened the French window, signed to Francesca that she might beat a retreat into the garden and avoid the assembled family, then pioneered Carlo through the hall to the carriage, talking to him as if they were just ending the discussion of some business matter. There were manifold hand-shakings, good wishes, regrets, and entreaties from Flo that he would come again ; but at last the ordeal was over, Carlo was shut into the carriage with Mr. Britton, and was driven rapidly along the dusty road to Ashborough. He was quite silent, and sat gazing out at the green hedgerows, seeing nothing, however, but the inward vision of the woman he loved. Not till they had reached the town did he dare to trust his voice, but a sudden perception that the time left to him was short roused his native courtesy, and he tried to thank his host for all the great kindness shown to him during his illness.

'My dear fellow,' said Mr. Britton, 'I can only say it has been a great pleasure to have you. I look on you as my prospective nephew, you know, though for the present we must keep that hope to ourselves.'

Carlo grasped his hand, those kindly words of hope seemed to put new life into him, and all through that dark day they rang in his ears. Travelling to Brighton, among the hosts of holiday excursionists, he could not help remembering the drive back from Pompeii on that last Whit-Monday. It was less than a year ago, and yet how endless the time seemed to him ! How should he ever get through a whole lifetime when eleven months had seemed so long and weary ? But, fortunately, he had long ago discovered that by trying to take in the idea of life as a whole we only give ourselves mental indigestion, and that a day at a time is as much as a man can healthily swallow. He turned quite away from both past and future, and taking

out his copy of *Ernani*, began to study the part of Don Carlos with the close attention and imaginative power which made his impersonations so great a contrast to the average attainments of an operatic singer.

Sardoni was waiting for him at the Brighton station, and though the thought of returning to the old life had been distasteful, yet somehow he fell back into his old place very naturally, and talked cheerfully enough as they drove through the crowded streets to the Merlino's lodgings.

'Merlino has engaged a room for you,' explained Sardoni; 'they are staying close to the theatre, and I thought you would rather be with them. Marion and I are down by the sea.'

'And Comerio has gone?'

'Thank Heaven, yes! He came to see us off at Victoria last night. That London engagement came in the very nick of time. If it hadn't been for that I believe he would have managed to prevent your coming back. These are your quarters, and look! there is Gigi on the balcony.'

On catching sight of them the little fellow beat a hasty retreat, and came rushing headlong down the stairs, where, with a cry of joy, he flung himself into Carlo's arms, and clung with all the strength of a child's eager love round his neck.

'Mamma is upstairs,' panted Gigi. 'Come and see her.'

Carlo, still carrying the little brown-faced fellow in his arms, went up to the sitting-room, looking anxiously towards the pretty, slim figure standing in the bow-window. The brother and sister had been long enough apart to see each other with something of the freshness of observation which comes to relations after they have been separated for some time.

Nita thought she had never before noticed what a beautiful face he had; Carlo perceived, as he had never perceived before, the worn, unsatisfied expression which was now so plainly visible about her mouth and in her eyes. 'If I could only comfort her,' he thought,—'if I could only get the least bit nearer to her!' But more than ever he felt that she kept him wilfully at a distance, and that her love for Comerio was an impassable barrier which must make her cold and distant to the man who had taken his place.

This was the hardest part of all, that he loved her, and yet could not win her love; that he had lost all to help her, and that she would not be helped; that he tried ceaselessly to break down the barrier between them, and that she as persistently tried to build it up again.

There was nothing for him to do but to go on patiently,

never despairing ; but it was hard work, and his heart sank within him at the prospect, even while he talked cheerfully to Merlino and dined composedly, and answered Gigi's questions about Merlebank. He lingered behind the others to see the last of the little boy, then made his way along the colonnade to the stage-door of the theatre. The door-keeper looked up from his newspaper and gave him a friendly greeting, for Merlino's Company had had a very successful week at Brighton in November, and Carlo invariably won the hearts of all the officials by his pleasant manner and unwillingness to give any trouble.

'Hope you're better, sir,' said the man. 'I have a letter for you here.'

He handed him an envelope ; Carlo thanked him and passed on to his dressing-room, where, not without a certain repugnance, he perceived the crimson velvet costume, worn last Monday by Comerio, laid out for him. Then he looked again at the handwriting of his letter, and, failing to recognise it, began to wonder whether it would prove to be an unwelcome love-letter or a forgotten bill. It was late, however, and he dressed before satisfying his curiosity ; then making his way to the green-room, opened it and glanced at the contents.

The letter was neither addressed nor signed, but he had not lived through all these months of public life without receiving sundry anonymous communications, some of them kindly, some of them grossly insulting.

This particular missive consisted solely of an Italian proverb : — '*Aspetta tempo e luogo a far tua vendetta, che la non si fa mai ben in fretta* : '—Wait time and place to act thy revenge, for it is never well done in a hurry.

There was a vagueness about this which puzzled him. Was it from some outsider who would warn him that his haste in getting rid of Comerio had been impolitic ? Or was it from Comerio himself, and did it imply that, although he might not at once revenge himself, yet Carlo was not to think that he had forgotten—that vengeance would most certainly follow him ?

While he waited for his first entrance he showed the note to Sardoni, who at once solved the mystery by recognising Comerio's handwriting.

'That is from our friend the Corsican,' he remarked ; 'I should know his writing anywhere.'

'Is Comerio a Corsican ? I never knew that. Then such a message is doubly significant.'

'Why ?' asked Sardoni.

'Because a Corsican never forgives. A Neapolitan may kill

his man in sudden passion, but a Corsican will wait for years, and strike at last with the cool premeditation of a devil.'

Sardoni looked grave; he could believe anything of such a man as Comerio, and he resolved to keep a sharp watch, and play the part of detective in the interests of his friend. It was not a very cheerful missive to receive just before going on the stage; but though Carlo candidly owned that the thought of a stealthy vengeance dogging his steps sent an occasional cold chill through his veins, yet he reminded himself that one can grow accustomed to almost anything, and that, after all, his enemy's vengeance was powerless to shorten the life that had been marked out for him by a single hour. And perhaps his own private troubles helped him to give a yet more powerful rendering of the duel scene and the death of Valentino.

'It frightens me to act with you,' was Nita's comment; 'you make it all too horribly real, you die so dreadfully.'

'Yet he is not so violent as Comerio,' remarked old Bauer. 'He does not push you away, for instance, but dies like a Christian, kissing the cross and forgiving you.'

'The difference is,' said Marioni, 'that Comerio dies like an angry blusterer and Donati like a heart-broken hero. His voice seems better than ever after the rest.'

The next morning Carlo felt a not unnatural reaction after the strain of the previous day: the long rest had, as Marioni remarked, strengthened his voice, but he felt ludicrously stiff after his two falls in the duel scene, and quite perceived that though being out of practice might not affect his acting at the time, yet it told severely on him afterwards, and made the work, to which in course of time he would become inured, a hard and wearing toil. After breakfast he strolled with Gigi through the Pavilion gardens; then, remembering that he had asked that letters from Merlebank might be directed to him at the General Post-office, he went to inquire if any had arrived, not exactly expecting any, but with a lover's restless hope for the improbable. His heart beat quickly when an envelope in Clare's writing was handed to him, but it only enclosed a letter from Enrico Ritter, which had arrived just after he had left Merlebank. Now that Francesca was in England, Enrico's letters meant much less to him, and he sauntered down Ship Street, and yielded to Gigi's entreaties to go on the beach before he began to read it. The letter was unusually short and abrupt, and had evidently been written in great haste.

'Prepare your mind for bad news, *amico mio*,' it began. 'Your uncle has died suddenly of an apoplexy, and I have just learnt the conditions of his will. He has kept his word, and

has disinherited you, leaving every penny he possesses to the Little Sisters of the Poor. We are all, as you may imagine, in a fine state of indignation, and find it beyond human nature not to speak evil of the dead. I must warn you, too, that you have a living enemy, who is doing his best to rob you, not of money, but of your reputation. Some person or persons unknown have set on foot a scandal about you and Mlle. Borelli, and it is all over the place. Something of the sort was suggested last autumn; the first I heard of it was a mere surmise, half jestingly made at a ball; Miss Britton also overheard the words, and for her sake I made as light of them as possible, and, indeed, they were, I believe, lightly meant. Now it is possible, of course, that these words started the current slander, but I think it very probable that Comerio may have had a hand in the affair, and thought it best to tell you plainly the truth that you and Mlle. Borelli are the talk of Naples. You can now take whatever steps you think fit, and, of course, can count on us to fight your battles.'

Carlo looked up from this ill-fated letter with a dazzled, confused feeling that all the world was against him. The calm, blue sea, and the pleasure-boats, and the merry children playing on the shore, contrasted painfully enough with his troubled life. His uncle was dead, and had never forgiven him! The thought was a real grief, for he had loved the autocratic old man, and had hoped that some day all might be made right between them. Then there was that vile, that extraordinary slander. Burning wrath consumed him as he pictured to himself Domenica Borelli, of all women on earth, singled out to be the victim of such hateful gossip. And what could be done? How could such a slander be stamped out? It might be met with an authoritative denial, but what would Neapolitan gossips care for that? Though very possibly Comerio might have circulated the story, yet it could not definitely be traced home to him; no one had heard him publicly make such a statement, and a prosecution was out of the question, even if he had been rich enough to afford it. No, he could do nothing but endure as patiently as might be; but he realised only too painfully that slander, however false, however actively contradicted, does in this world leave a slur, and that the purest life and the highest motives are no protection against those whose work consists of

'Peddling in the devil's hardware,  
Gossip and innuendo.'

And, alas! how little he had as yet gained. How far from satisfied could he as yet feel about Anita. For a mere hope he

had lost everything; the love of poor old Uncle Guido, the inheritance that was his by right, the home and country which he loved, the wife who should have been his, and now either deliberate malice, or mere careless and baleful talk, had robbed him of the last thing left to him,—his fair and stainless reputation.

He was very young, and when the first hot indignation had died away, he could only wonder, with a sort of blank astonishment, how that particular charge could possibly have been brought up against him. People might justly have reproached him with his hasty temper, his impatience, his love of ease and pleasure, with a hundred other faults of which he was perfectly conscious; but to fasten upon him that particular accusation, to charge him with the very sin from which he was trying at all costs to save another, that seemed to him hard measure, it wounded him as nothing else could have wounded him.

Those who know life well, and have bought their experience, and have gained that long-sighted vision which belongs to the full-grown, can, even in the first pain of a personal attack, 'rejoice and be exceeding glad,' and realise that the devil thinks their work worth molesting. But the young have always a feeling that the devil is not so black as he is painted, and that the world is, after all, kindly disposed, and so their first experience of injustice comes like a crushing blow; it amazes them, and they learn with a shudder that the world will always impute low motives, and that they must learn to expect this and bear it with composure.

The news in the letter which would have most painfully affected many—the account of the lost inheritance—was the last point which occurred to Carlo. Still he did not regard money with absolute indifference, or consider that there was any particular merit in poverty, and it was not in nature that a man of four-and-twenty should lose a fortune and feel no pang of regret. Money was a power, there was no denying that, and he was living now from hand to mouth—a process less pleasant in practice than in theory. In the reaction from inordinate love of riches there is now-a-days a good deal of cant about 'holy poverty' and 'contemptible wealth'; but Carlo, being a very practical and simple-natured man, did not affect to look on the loss of his inheritance from any superior height of other-worldliness. It chafed him sorely to owe money to Herr Ritter and to see no immediate prospect of paying back the principal; it had cost him much to ask his doctor whether he would allow him to pay by instalments for the constant attendance through the weeks at Merlebank; it had pained

him to have to calculate the cost of his journey to Brighton, and to find that his donations to the servants who had been so good to him must be of the smallest. For money in itself he cared not at all, but being in the true sense of the word a gentleman, he had a horror of being in debt, and found the constant care necessary to make both ends of his scanty income meet a most irksome duty. Such matters cannot be looked at in a vague, impersonal way; and though the ideal hero of sentimental romance is always above such contemptible considerations, yet a straightforward, honourable man is bound to care for the possession of such money as will enable him to pay his way honestly in the world. Carlo thought with a sigh of the thousands of pounds which he had been led to expect as his inheritance, and then of the constant struggle to live on his small salary. Comerio had received twelve guineas a week, but he as a novice had consented to take only half that amount, and Piale, thinking that he would never continue in a travelling company after the first year, had been fairly well satisfied with the arrangement, and, indeed, would have consented to anything so long as his wish of inducing his pupil to go on the stage had been gratified. Carlo had no intention, however, of accepting better offers at the end of the first year, so he saw before him an indefinite time of hard work and small pay, for he could not afford to bargain with Merlino or quarrel with him as any other novice might have done.

As Carlyle remarks, 'No beautifullest poet is a bird of paradise, living on perfumes, sleeping in the æther, with outstretched wings. The heroic, *independent* of bed and board, is found in Drury Lane Theatre only.'

Out of his six guineas a week he must somehow manage to pay for board, lodging, and clothes, must give the conventional gratuities to his dresser, must provide certain parts of his stage wardrobe—to wit, shoes, tights, wigs, and feathers,—must pay the interest on the loan from Herr Ritter, and try to put by as much as might be towards Mr. Kavanagh's account. He knew, of course, that many a clerk, many an English curate, had to count himself lucky if he got as large a salary, but then it was less possible for him to economise. Lodgings, hastily sought in a foreign country, often proved dear as well as comfortless; bills, even at third-rate hotels, seemed to mount up with frightful rapidity; while to play any pranks with his diet was out of the question, since his voice was dependent on regular and suitable food. He longed impatiently to be free from this grinding poverty which was

so foreign to his nature, nor did it comfort him much to reflect that he was better off than many members of travelling companies, since, at any rate, Merlino always paid his way, was a man with capital, and was not for ever trembling on the brink of bankruptcy. It only made him feel very sorry for his brother artistes, and slightly curious to know how they managed to live at all.

He had reached this point in his reflections when Gigi came running up to him.

'I do so dreadfully want a spade and pail, *zio caro* !' he said, looking up at him with his wistful brown eyes.

'There are many things, my Gigi, which we do so dreadfully want, but can't have,' he replied, laughing a little, and stroking the child's brown cheek. 'You and I, Gigi, must learn to go without, and must do what we can to amuse each other.'

And forgetting poverty, and slander, and even poor old Uncle Guido, he transformed himself into so delightful a sea-monster that Gigi rushed in blissful terror and excitement to the shelter of the nearest boat, and by the time the chase was over, and he had been devoured and resuscitated in the conventional manner, all thought of spades and pails had vanished from his mind, and he had fallen back to his old refrain of 'I do love you so !'

## CHAPTER XXXII

### AFTER TWO YEARS

'Heart, thou must learn to do without—  
That is the riches of the poor ;  
Their liberty is to endure ;  
Wrap thou thy old cloak thee about,  
And carol loud, and carol stout !

\* \* \* \* \*  
Why should'st thou only wear no clout ?  
Thou only walk in love-ropes pure ?  
Thy step alone be firm and sure ?  
Thou only free of fortune's flout ?—  
Nay, nay ! but learn to go without,  
And so be humbly, richly poor.'

*A Threefold Cord.*

THE bright spring sunshine was streaming into a sitting-room in the Lafayette at Philadelphia, and Nita's sweet, clear



soprano woke the echoes with that most charming of songs, '*Caro nome.*' Carlo, who from the first had constituted himself her accompanist at her daily practice, was seated at the piano, and something in the faces of both brother and sister showed plainly that time had passed. Two years had gone by since Carlo had rejoined the Company at Brighton, and spite of excessively hard work—spite of the weary day and night journeys, with too often an exhausting performance at the end of them—his healthy, vigorous nature had asserted itself, and all signs of delicacy of chest had disappeared, while further cultivation, and increasing physical strength, had rendered his voice more than ever notable. The daily round of work had been monotonous enough, and yet the second and third years of his professional life had certainly seemed far shorter to him than the first had done. But then nothing flies so fast as fully occupied time, especially when no very important events come to interrupt the routine. And nothing had happened worthy of note in these two years. Comerio's vengeance had not as yet taken effect—he had not followed them to America; and scarcely any changes had been made in the Company. Mademoiselle de Caisne had, indeed, gone back to Italy, finding it impossible to make the slightest impression on the new baritone: her place had been filled by a very young American girl. It seemed probable, too, that Sardoni and Domenica Borelli would not remain very much longer in the troupe. They had now been betrothed for several months, and were to be married in New York before Merlino's Company sailed for Italy, which they expected to do towards the end of May. Carlo hardly knew how to face the thought of life without his two best friends, but their contracts with Merlino both expired in the following autumn, and he could not but admit that their married life would probably be much happier if they carried out Sardoni's idea, and settled down in London, where they might both hope to gain a fair livelihood by teaching, eked out by occasional engagements. Yet, though little had happened, the general tone of the Company had certainly been raised; the Impresario had become a trifle less rough and overbearing; Nita, though she was still as far as ever from being a happy wife, seemed to rebel less bitterly against her lot; while Carlo's character had grown and developed as a man's character does develop when he is trying incessantly to live the highest life.

As he played the accompaniment of '*Caro nome,*' his thoughts involuntarily turned to Francesca, and he began to

wonder whether Sardoni would soon come back from his walk, and whether he would have remembered to call at the post-office for letters. It was possible that he might to-day hear from Enrico, and he was terribly hungry for news, for Clare, with the best of intentions, was too busy to write very often, and when she did write could only give him second-hand reports, while Enrico was as far as ever from understanding the sort of details for which a lover craves.

He looked up eagerly as the door opened and Sardoni entered.

'Did you remember the letters?' he asked, glad that the song should have ended at such an opportune moment.

'For a wonder, yes,' replied Sardoni, who since his engagement to Domenica had been ludicrously absent-minded. 'But there were none for you, Val, only one for Madame Merlino.'

Carlo was sadly disappointed, but yet was so well used to disappointment that by the time he had played through a few bars of '*Caro nome*' his face had resumed its usual expression.

Sardoni left the room again, and Nita, throwing herself back in a rocking-chair, began to read her letter. As she read, an uncontrollable exclamation of surprise escaped her. Carlo, who was turning over the pages of *Rigoletto* and still whistling the air of '*Caro nome*,' looked up quickly.

'Is anything the matter?' he asked, and as he spoke he noticed for the first time the big letters of the 'Napoli' post-mark.

She read on without answering, but something in her face roused a nameless fear in his heart; did the letter concern Comerio? The handwriting was not Enrico's or his fears would have been instantly aroused; he would have imagined that some evil must have befallen Francesca—some evil which his friend did not dare to tell him abruptly and without preparation. But that fear was not awakened. It must, then, surely be connected with Comerio, this Italian letter! If only she would speak and put him out of his suspense!

He sat down near her and waited, not wishing to force himself upon her in any way; and at length she looked up and, with a strange tone in her voice, said, 'I have heard from Mlle. de Caisne, Carlo. You had better read her letter, and she encloses these.'

In some surprise he took the papers she handed to him, and glanced at the first. It was a half-sheet of paper, on the back of which the following words were written in Italian,

'An advertisement cut out of the *Times*.' Neatly pasted on the other side were a few brief lines of English print,—'On the 26th inst., at Naples, by the British Consul and by the Rev. J. Smith, RENATO, CONTE CAROSSA, to FRANCESCA, elder daughter of Captain JOHN BRITTON, R.N.'

Carlo neither spoke nor moved; the blow struck at his heart had been so fearfully sudden that after the first moment of agony he felt nothing, but was like one paralysed. Still holding the advertisement in his hand, he stared at those words which had shattered his whole life; then, as sensation slowly returned, a horrible craving to know more seized him, and he snatched up the next paper. It was a leaflet printed in silver, an English wedding-hymn, 'The voice that breathed o'er Eden'; he read it through from beginning to end with a sort of blank, dazed feeling. Then he took the next slip. It was a cutting from the *Roma*, just a short paragraph stating that the marriage of Count Carossa had called forth general attention, owing to the fact that his bride was the acknowledged *belle* of Naples. That the beautiful English girl had made a charming bride, and that according to the English custom the wedding-party had been entertained at breakfast after the ceremony at Casa Bella, the residence of Captain Britton.

Lastly, he read with feverish haste Mlle. de Caisne's letter, rushing impatiently through the preliminaries till he came to the following remark,—'The marriage of Count Carossa is the great topic of the day here, and knowing how intimate you and your brother were with the English owners of Casa Bella, I send you full particulars. The wedding was really a beautiful sight, the bride wore a dress of ivory-white satin with a very long train; and it really is wonderful how even in this climate English girls seem to preserve their complexion. Miss Britton's is the most charmingly delicate colouring I ever saw. Everyone is envious of Count Carossa. I only hope he deserves so fascinating a wife.'

Carlo folded the papers and put them back in their envelope. Every vestige of colour had left his face, and Nita began to wonder whether he would ever move or speak again—he looked as if he had been turned to stone. She was frightened, and yet the sight did not appeal to her, it even made her a little angry and impatient, for she had not heart enough to understand him.

There was a long, burdened silence, broken at length by Nita.

'Well,' she said, with a bitter tone in her voice; 'now, at any rate, you will know what it means to have a legal bar between you and the one you love.'

At this his stony despair suddenly changed, the frozen blood seemed to boil in his veins, and a look of anguish, which terrified her, dawned in his eyes. Her words had most cruelly, most recklessly, thrust the terrible truth before him. He got up quickly, and walked with unsteady steps to the door, by a sort of blind instinct perceiving that to be away from his sister would be a relief.

But Nita had no sooner spoken than she regretted her words, and would have given anything to recall them. She rushed after him and caught his hand in hers.

'Don't go, Carlo!' she cried. 'I am sorry I said that—I am sorry for you. Carlino! Stay!'

Her presence was almost more than he could endure, but though past thinking definitely of anything but the crushing blow he had received and the torturing pain it caused him, the mere habit of considering others before himself made him pause now, though he longed sorely to be alone with his trouble.

'Ah, why should we have such things to bear?' she cried passionately, thinking even now far more of her own trouble than of his.

'God help us both!' he groaned.

Then, dropping her hand, he turned away and flung himself face downwards on the couch, unable to resist any longer the paroxysm of grief which overwhelmed him.

Nita watched him much as Kate Britton had watched him in the hut; her woman's soul was touched to the quick, and though only a minute before she had cried, 'Why should we have such things to bear?' she saw now, with a sharp pang of regret, that Carlo's grief was the direct consequence of her own weakness. She fell down on her knees beside him.

'Carlino!' she sobbed, 'forgive me—forgive me! It is I who have brought it all on you.'

He did not look up or speak, but put out his hand for hers and held it fast in a grasp that seemed to burn her. She thought he grew calmer and ventured to speak again, longing to awaken his pity for her own case.

'Don't you see now, Carlo, that you have been expecting too much of me?' she pleaded. 'Oh, don't you see now how all those ideas of yours are in practice impossible?'

Her last word, emphatically spoken, seemed to fill him with strength. In an instant he was on his feet, while she still

knelt on, looking up at him in awe and astonishment. Somehow it seemed to her that she was face to face with the perfection of manhood.

‘Nothing is impossible!’ he said.

And the words seemed to ring and pulsate in her ears as no words had ever done before.

She cowered down and hid her face, trembling before the first divine revelation which had ever come home to her innermost heart. It was a relief to her when she heard him leave the room, but the pitifulness of the story overcame her again; the love, so far beyond any love of which she herself was yet capable, had at length touched her heart, and she sobbed for grief and pity.

‘Why,—oh why,’ she thought, with bitter regret, ‘did I not from the first resist the evil thoughts that came? It must have been possible for me too!’

In the meantime Carlo had locked himself into his own room, and there, pacing to and fro, looked his sorrow in the face like a man. Thousands, as he was well aware, must have been called to bear the same thing before, but yet there were circumstances which made his case doubly hard; the utter want of preparation, the dearth of all but the most public accounts of the marriage, the knowledge that of his own free will he had left Francesca and gone out into the world. For eight long years he had loved her, and though there had been grief, and trouble, and separation for them, yet he had been sure of her love through all, and had been free to lavish on her his heart’s devotion. But now in one moment all was ended between them, and the thought of his love, which, in spite of the separation, had been an unfailing solace to him through these weary years of public life, was now only a torture, a peril. There would be no beautiful reality, all his own, to which he could come back when the day’s work was over, as to some sacred and safe retreat; she was now the wife of another, and he must no longer think of her as his betrothed. His safe retreat had become a place of torment. He saw that life would be one long battle, and that the best he could hope for after long conflict, was so far to subdue himself that he should dare to meet her as a friend; be able, perhaps, to serve her in some faint, far-off way; be at least able to carry a brave front, and cast no shadow on her wedded happiness.

But was she happy? Had she, perhaps, been forced to acquiesce, in obedience to her father’s wishes? Count Carossa

might well prove an importunate suitor, and decline to accept as final her first refusal. Had she been forced against her will to accept him? Or had he really won her heart; and did she now see that the past was but a girlish dream, evanescent, and not wholly sweet? He hardly knew which of these possibilities pained him most; he glanced now at one, now at the other, till the misery of ignorance and suspense almost maddened him. And then, with a pang of the worst pain he had yet felt, a horrible new idea shot through his mind.

There was that vile slander which had been set on foot two years ago, and which still inevitably worked its poisonous way, growing more dangerous with age, as slanders do. Francesca had heard the first rumours, Enrico had told him as much, she herself at Merlebank had half hinted something of the sort. At first she had indignantly refused to credit them, but when the tale was in everyone's mouth, why then her very innocence and ignorance of the world would surely make her credit them the more easily; and how ready the Captain would be to believe anything of the sort touching an operatic singer, he realised only too bitterly. More and more as he thought of it this seemed to him the only explanation of the marriage. He could not believe that anything else could possibly have robbed him of Francesca's love. But if all around her believed him to be not only guilty of such a sin, but to be such a contemptible hypocrite as to have sought his own pleasure under the cover of protecting his sister, might she not possibly have been induced to believe the slander too? And, once believed, such a story must inevitably kill love. For a while he sat rapt in the miserable contemplation of this thought, then suddenly his mind revolted from the idea of any kind of distrust in Francesca. No, it was not possible! She would believe in him against the whole world, would love him for ever, not for any merit in himself, but because of the truth, and purity, and beauty of her own nature. She had been coerced into the marriage with Count Carossa. Again he fell back into the weary round of surmises, rejecting each in turn, but always confronted by the terrible realisation that, however the marriage had been brought about, it was a fact, —a fact which gave the death-blow to his hope, and doomed him to go through life alone.

For he must go on living, and must face the thought at once. Indeed, into his simple, healthy mind no thought of death had entered, though most truly life looked to him desolate enough; but it is in times of great trouble that a good

man's real character is tested, and every dull, monotonous day of work in Merlino's Company had added something to his manly steadfastness, and gave him power now to go straight on and do his duty without flinching. He brought back his thoughts with an effort to the present,—*Rigoletto* that evening, the necessity of dining at once, the fear lest his trouble should at all mar the happiness of Sardoni and Domenica, his best friends, and a resolution to keep the news from them if possible till their wedding was over. With this thought in his mind he turned to the glass, saw that trouble was very legibly stamped on his face, and resolved to dine alone at some restaurant, that he might escape observation. On the staircase he met Anita; she looked up at him in a scared way.

'Do not speak of this to anyone else,' he said, in a low voice; 'above all, not to Sardoni or Domenica. Let it be only between us two, at any rate till after the wedding.'

She promised, although she was far from understanding the motives which prompted the request, and Carlo with a heavy heart passed on, and walked slowly down Broad Street. He remembered, as he walked, the sense of horrible loneliness which had seized him when he walked back from the Strada Nuova to Palazzo Forti, after the *Pilgrim* had sailed from Naples; but that suffering had been light indeed compared to what he was called to bear to-day. It seemed to him now that he was alive and yet dead, that the outer shell of everyday existence would go on in a mechanical way, just as if nothing had happened, but that the heart had been destroyed, and that nothing could ever bring it back to vitality.

In a sort of dream of pain he watched the passers-by, and wondered whether in their careless talk they, too, might be robbing someone of his reputation, and doing the devil's work in the world. A feeling of strong resentment rose up in his mind, he walked more quickly, the colour came back to his face, and his hot, southern blood began to burn and tingle in his veins; if he could have been suddenly confronted by the unknown being who had set on foot this slander he could have killed him, at least so in his hot indignation he fancied.

Once more Nita's bitter words rang in his ears;—'A legal bar between you and the one you love.'

'After all,' urged the tempter, 'are you not aiming at the impossible? Why should you think of her as his wife when the thought tortures you? What! you mean to allow no thought that you could not lay bare to her sight, or the sight of her husband? Fool! Give up! Is such love as yours to

be cramped, and fettered, and starved ; love that has lasted all these years ?'

'You'll forgive me making bold to stop you, sir,' said a familiar voice. He looked round and saw Adamson, the scene-shifter. 'I wanted to catch you alone, sir, and at the theatre there be always others within hearing ; and I guessed you'd be glad to hear, sir, that it's all come right.'

The sudden reaction from the terrible temptation to the story of the honest-looking old man, who had been one of his first friends in the Company, taxed his powers to the utmost. His brain seemed to reel, but with an effort he dragged himself back to the recollection of Adamson's trouble. His daughter, a pretty American girl, sang soprano in the chorus, and for some time her father had been very uneasy about her, and Carlo had watched with a good deal of interest the progress of a small drama in which his dresser, Sebastiano, played the part of lover.

'It's all come right, sir,' repeated Adamson ; 'and it's all owing to you. I don't know what you've done to Sebastiano, sir, but he's kind o' altered. They're a-going to git married right away !'

The need of giving the old man his hearty sympathy restored Carlo to himself. He went into a restaurant and ate his dinner soberly, but in his dark sky there were two gleams of light : the first was the recollection that Nita's heart had been at length reached ; the second, that his hopes for Sebastiano had been fulfilled. There came to him, too, the perception that there was still one way in which he might safely serve Francesca. He could pray that her marriage might be a happy one. There was at least that still to be hoped for.

He went back to the Lafayette, found a letter which he had written earlier in the day to Enrico, and added the following brief postscript :—

'Why did you tell me nothing of Count Carossa's marriage ? Send me all particulars, if you can, to New York.'

More than that he could not bring himself to put even to his friend, but to Clare he wrote a long letter and poured out all his trouble, for she was a woman, and he knew she would understand. Then, relieved a little by this, he took the letters himself to the post, and made his way to the theatre. In Locust Street, close to the stage-door, he met Sardoni, who was much too full of his own affairs to be very observant.

'The day is fixed at last,' he said, cheerfully ; 'it is to be



at New York next Sunday week. Will you be my best man, old fellow ?'

'Of course I will, Jack, if you wish it,' said Carlo. 'Does your father come out for the wedding ?'

'No ; but he has asked us to stay with him in the autumn, and your letter has evidently done a good deal towards reconciling him to the notion. We owe everything to you, Val.'

Carlo turned into his dressing-room, only to be confronted by Sebastiano. He had heard too much of marriages that day, but yet must congratulate his dresser, and, as he put on his jester's costume of red and yellow motley, must listen to the story old Adamson had told him, all over again.

'Why, signore !' exclaimed Sebastiano when he had finished his tale, 'see ! You have put the red stocking on the left leg instead of the yellow one ! One might think that you were in my case !'

Carlo smiled good-naturedly, congratulated the dresser again and dismissed him ; but when he was alone he bowed his head on his hands and sat for a long time motionless, overwhelmed by a sense of utter desolation. What was there left to him ? Well, there was a certain increasing fame. But, after all, what was that ? Success was sweet, and yet in a way it did but make him feel his loneliness the more. Often enough the tears would start to his eyes when he read glowing praise of his artistic work, because he could not help thinking how such things would have pleased his mother. The chief worth of all such recognition is the pleasure it gives to those who love us, and he now stood practically alone in the world ; success and fame would be his, but neither father nor mother, neither wife nor child, would be present with him to make them seem worth while.

The voice of the call-boy roused him from his sad thoughts. He wrung his hands together.

'My God, help me !' he groaned.

Then taking up his jester's cap with its gold coxcomb, he made his way to the wings and was soon transformed into the malicious, mocking Rigoletto, playing the part with his customary skill, and receiving with his usual quiet modesty the thunder of applause which rewarded him.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII

## GENOA

' Ah, well, the world is discreet ;  
 There are plenty to pause and wait ;  
 But here was a man who set his feet  
 Sometimes in advance of fate.

Never rode to the wrong's redressing  
 A worthier paladin.  
 Shall he not hear the blessing—  
 " Good and faithful, enter in " ?'—WHITTIER.

A MONTH passed by. In his outer life Carlo went through the series of farewell performances at New York, attended Sardoni's wedding, and travelled back to Italy. In his inner life he fought a terrible battle and came out conqueror.

No further details of Francesca's marriage had as yet reached him to relieve his misery of ignorance and suspense. Apparently both Clare and Enrico shrank from touching on so difficult a subject, and all he had received by way of answer to his letter was a copy of the *Roma* from Enrico, containing the same paragraph which Mlle. de Caisne had enclosed.

The shrewd-looking official, who presided at the *bureau* in the hall of one of the hotels at Genoa, sat speculating to himself as he saw the much-talked-of baritone pass into the breakfast-room on the morning after Merlino's Company had landed in Italy.

There was something about Donati's face which he could not understand: it was not the face one would have expected in a man who, at six-and-twenty, had achieved a striking success, and who was said to be the finest baritone in Europe. Sorrow had not hardened him or soured him, but it had added a sort of depth to his expression, and just now he bore always the look of one who has imposed on himself a strong restraint.

The official was pleased when, on leaving the breakfast-room, Carlo came to the *bureau* to buy some stamps, and he adroitly seized the opportunity to prefer a request.

' Will you write your name in the visitor's book, signore ?' he said. ' Everyone in the place is looking forward to your appearance to-night, you will see the theatre will be packed from floor to ceiling ! Your full name, if you will favour us, signore ; the autograph will be valuable.'

Carlo smiled a little at the thought that his very commonplace handwriting should be in demand; then, happening to glance up the page at the names of the other visitors, his heart suddenly leapt into his mouth as he read, 'Il Conte Carossa, e Contessa Carossa.' The names were both apparently written in the Count's writing. He turned quickly to the *concierge*.

'Count Carossa is still in the hotel?'

'Yes, signore; that is to say, he is out just at this moment, but he has taken his rooms for a week. The Contessa is in the *salotto*. I saw her go in just now.'

For a moment he hesitated. Francesca was here under the same roof with him! Dared he seek her out? Dared he hear from her own lips the whole truth? When he had landed on the previous evening he had sent off another urgent letter imploring Enrico to write, or, if possible, to come and see him at Genoa, where they had accepted a brief engagement; but now to be told that Francesca was close to him threw him completely off his balance, and an impulse scarcely resistible drove him towards the *salotto*. Should he not enter that room? Should he not see her at least for this once? And yet every throbbing pulse within him warned him not to do so, proved to him beyond dispute that for Francesca's sake and for his own he had far better not seek her out.

With a struggle that seemed to him bitter as death, he forced himself to pass by that closed door, and to go upstairs to his room. He was not left long in peace, for Gigi—who had grown into a very manly little fellow of nearly seven years old, and who had been greatly improved by two years at a good school in New York—came bounding in with an eager request.

'*Zio caro*, don't you remember you promised to take me to Villa Pallavicini this morning? I guess we'll never be likely to get a finer day, and I do so dreffly want to see the fountains.'

Though sick at heart, Carlo would not refuse the little fellow's petition, and he dragged himself over to Pegli, trying hard to enter into Gigi's happiness, listening to his raptures over the beautiful gardens, and smiling politely when their conductor—a wizen, shrewd-looking, little man—made time-honoured jokes, and tried to be facetious. Neither the glorious views of sea and mountain, nor the lovely groves of ilex, olive, eucalyptus, and pine trees, nor the glowing colour of the aloes and rhododendrons, could rouse in him that day the slightest pleasure. Gigi chattered merrily as they rowed in a little boat under charge of a broad-shouldered, kindly old boatman through the stalactite cave, and gave a shout of delight when, as they

passed on, and came in sight of the fountains, they saw one of the gardeners carrying out the usual practical joke of turning the watering-hose in the direction of some visitors, who fled with good-natured laughter.

'Look, *zio caro* ! oh, do look !' cried the child, clapping his hands.

And Carlo, glancing round, saw, only a stone's-throw from him, on the bank, a little group of visitors, and among them Count Carossa and Francesca.

She did not see him, and, after one long look, he turned away with a sick, dizzy feeling, and knew that he was answering the boatman's remarks at random, and vaguely wondered whether, after the first shock, that sight would grow more bearable to him.

How he lived through that day he never quite knew, but he had learnt the truth of the words which he had spoken to Anita at Philadelphia that 'Nothing is impossible'; and when the evening came, though Sardonì had dined with him, and stayed afterwards talking of Domenica's perfections, and of his anxiety about his father's first sight of her, Carlo had betrayed nothing, but seemed as ready as ever to sympathise with his friend's affairs.

So engrossed was the tenor with his own happiness that he was amazed when, that evening at the theatre, Anita drew him aside, and, with tears in her eyes, begged for his advice.

'You are Carlo's friend !' she said, in low, hurried tones ; 'for God's sake tell me what to do ! The Contessa Carossa is sitting in the stalls ! Shall I tell Carlo before he goes on ?'

Sardonì stared.

'Who, in Heaven's name, may the Contessa Carossa be ?' he asked.

'*Insomma !* I forgot you had not been told ! He kept it from you because he would not have you troubled at the time of your wedding. She is Francesca Britton, the girl he was to have married ! He heard when we were at Philadelphia that she had become the wife of Count Carossa.'

Sardonì gave an inarticulate exclamation of rage and regret.

'He must be told !' he said. 'A sudden shock like that might make him break down. I will tell him myself !'

Nita thanked him. She was dressed in the coquettish costume of 'Carmen,' but for the first time Sardonì noticed a softened look about her face. He saw that she had begun at last really to care for her brother, and that apparently Comerio, who was also engaged at Genoa during the summer season, had

not regained his old influence with her. This, however, was but the first night of the engagement,—he wondered greatly whether her strength would hold out to the end. And then he thought wrathfully of Francesca Britton, and remembered with compunction how he had talked of nothing for the last few weeks but his own happiness; and with regret, and perplexity, and admiration for his friend all mingled, he knocked at the dressing-room door, determined to speak out plainly and prepare his companion for what awaited him.

Carlo had just dismissed Sebastiano, and was fully equipped in the picturesque costume of Escamillo, the Toreador, with its green velvet jacket and knickerbockers faced with gold, broad red-and-gold sash, tan-coloured gaiters, and red flag thrown across the left shoulder. There was no time to be lost, and Sardonì began abruptly.

‘I have just been talking to your sister, Val. She thought, and I think too, that you ought to be prepared beforehand. Count Carossa and his wife are in the theatre.’

An exclamation of wonder and dismay escaped Carlo. He began to pace the room in terrible agitation.

‘Why did you keep your trouble from me, Val?’ said Sardonì, reproachfully. ‘And what, in Heaven’s name, can have made any woman forsake a man like you?’

Carlo turned upon him with a fierce gesture.

‘Not one word against her!’ he cried. ‘She was free—quite free! And what am I to deserve her, indeed?—a stage-singer with a tarnished reputation!’

‘What! You think, then, it was that slander?’ ejaculated Sardonì, understanding better why Carlo had kept all from him during this month.

‘I don’t know!—I can’t tell! For God’s sake, Jack, don’t talk, or I think I shall go mad!’

Again he walked to and fro, struggling with the thoughts which rushed in wild confusion through his brain. Why did Francesca come to hear him sing? It was so altogether unlike her to do so under the circumstances. Had she come to prove her indifference?—or did she still care for him, and snatch at this chance of seeing him?—or was she too much in awe of her husband to decline to go to the theatre? Each thought seemed to him almost equally intolerable. But time was passing, and he must somehow manage to get himself in hand. As he walked he prayed, and as he prayed he became once more willing to face whatever was sent. For he wasted no time in vain questionings as to why this particular trouble

should have come to him, and how it could possibly work for the general good. His strength lay in a habit of taking even the smaller details of life as God's ordering, and in a firm conviction that no man is ever set to do anything that is beyond his strength.

Francesca had married Count Carossa. That being so, he must and could learn to bear the thought. Nothing was impossible!

'Forgive me, dear old fellow, for speaking sharply!' he said, turning back to Sardoni. 'After all, Jack, I shall know now if she is happy or not; and if all is well with her, why nothing else matters much.'

Sardoni bit his lip; when he could see clearly again he found that Carlo was putting on his Spanish hat, and preparing to go to the wings. He went with him, choosing a position from which he could watch his friend's entrance and reception.

The part of Escamillo, though small, suited him admirably, nor could any scene have been better chosen for his reappearance in Italy than the picturesque entry of the bull-fighter. Sardoni wondered greatly how the Contessa Carossa felt down there in the stalls, as she watched with the rest the entrance of the torchlight procession, and saw the crowd group itself and look expectantly towards the back of the stage, till, amid a chorus of 'Hurrah for brave Escamillo!' the slight, graceful figure in toreador costume advanced through a little lane of torches.

Carlo's fame had preceded him, and the Genoese audience greeted him warmly; he took off his black velvet hat and bowed with the mingled dignity and simplicity of manner which made him at once revered and loved by so many. Then, quickly turning from the homage of the audience to the business of his part, and resuming the bold, genial bearing of Escamillo, he drained the wine-cup handed to him, tossed it across the stage to one of the chorus, and broke forth into the well-known Toreador Song.

His beautiful voice, the vigour of his acting, the imaginative power conveyed by each look and gesture, held the audience spell-bound, and Sardoni marvelled how, under the circumstances, he could sing the refrain of—

'Bear thou in mind, when combat thee elates,  
Two bright eyes fondly regard,  
For thee a fond heart waits, Toreador.'

At the close of the first verse the theatre rang with shouts

of 'Bravo.' And then once again came the graphic description of the bull-fight, till, by mere gesture and expression, he brought the whole scene vividly before the audience. Most of them had heard *Carmen* before, and had seen the baritone more or less energetically flap his red flag. But Carlo actually made them feel the suspense and excitement of the real contest. He surpassed himself, and when once more the refrain had been sung the whole house rose, and with frantic cheering gave the new baritone an ovation. Not one of the applauders guessed that the song had been to the singer a torturing effort, a mockery almost intolerable; or dreamed how his heart was aching as he stood there acknowledging their thanks. Not till the end did he dare to look towards the place where they had told him Francesca was sitting; but, as he stood close to the footlights, bowing his acknowledgments, he ventured one keen, searching glance; he would, at least, learn if she looked well and happy, would try to gauge the Count's character.

But he had expected too much of himself; all was confusion; he could only see that the Count was frantically applauding him, and that Francesca's eyes were shining and her cheeks glowing. After that brief glance the whole house swam before him, and the only thing for him to do was to get through, as quickly as might be, his brief dialogue with Carmen, and march off amid the greetings of his comrades while the orchestra once more played the Toreador air. The moment he was behind the scenes his brisk, blithe step changed, there was a sort of relief in being able to relax the strain he had put on himself, yet never, even in the first shock of the news of Francesca's marriage, had he felt such an overwhelming sense of loss and loneliness as now when he had actually seen her sitting beside her husband in the theatre. His first impulse was to lock himself into his dressing-room, but something made him hesitate; if he were alone he should think, and if he thought, he should be lost; the only chance of his being able to keep his faculties clear for the rest of the opera lay in avoiding thought as far as possible. After a minute he forced himself to go to the green-room and to join in the conversation, and there he remained through the interval, till the call-boy summoned him again, and Sebastiano handed him a striped scarf instead of the red one. Flinging it across his shoulder he stepped on to the stage, changed himself with an effort into the Toreador with his careless geniality, received with cool indifference Don José's indignation, and, when challenged to fight, gave a masterly representation of southern passion,

springing like a tiger on his foe, and, with drawn knife, fighting desperately. All was speedily over, and again he waited behind the scenes to sing the refrain of the Toreador Song in the distance.

'You look tired, Donati,' remarked Caffieri. 'Confoundedly hot, isn't it?'

He assented, though all the time he was shivering from head to foot. It was doubly hard to sing those words in cold blood off the stage. But he got through them somehow, and leaning wearily against the wall of the passage waited till the cries of 'Donati!' rose to a roar, and then he pulled himself together, crossed the stage, and stepped out before the curtain to accept the homage which just then meant to him so little.

'What must be borne can be borne,' he said to himself again and again; 'and at least Francesca is happy.'

And now the end of the opera was drawing near, and his part was almost over. Nita watched him with mingled wonder and sympathy as they waited side by side for their last entrance: he was grave and silent, and the chorus from the stage of 'Viva Escamillo!' jarred upon him she fancied, yet, though the wistful look in his eyes told plainly of his trouble, he was still ready as usual to think of other people.

'There is a horrible draught here!' he exclaimed, 'you will take cold, Nita.'

And so saying he wrapped his red scarf round her white shoulders, snatching it off again adroitly when they advanced on to the stage. Somehow she had never felt so near to him as at that minute. She knew so well what it was that made him tremble as, with his arm round her, he sang the pathetic little farewell of the Toreador, knew so well what it cost him to utter the words, 'If thou lovest me, Carmen, thou shalt smile by and bye; thou shalt be proud of me.'

Together they were just singing their mutual avowal of love, the house was hushed to catch the exquisitely blended voices in the last soft repetition of 'Yes, I love thee!' when from the gallery there rose a hoarse cry—the most terrible cry that can be raised in any great gathering—the cry of 'Fire!'

With a shriek Nita tore herself away and rushed from the stage, and in one instant it seemed to Carlo that the whole house was in an uproar. He shouted an assurance that there was no danger; he begged Marioni to go on with the opera; but it was all in vain. Then he stood like a statue in the front of the stage, though all around him his companions were



flying, though women were shrieking, though Marioni dragged him by the arm, imploring him to save himself while yet there was time. He shook himself free, and remained gazing down at the seething mass of people in the stalls, spite of all the confusion keeping his eye steadily on Count Carossa and his wife, till at length, with a pang of wrath and astonishment he saw the Count force a way through the crowd for a beautiful fair-haired girl beside him who seemed to be almost fainting with terror, and leave Francesca to take care of herself.

But indignation soon gave place to a thrill of wild exultation. At least it was his part to shield her now,—her husband had left her, and that time which he had thought might possibly come in some dim future had arrived—he might serve her—might, perhaps, save her from death.

He rushed to the side of the stage, leapt down into the deserted orchestra, dashed aside the music-stands which impeded his progress, cleared the barrier at a bound, and, with the agility which was natural to him increased by the fearful excitement, forced his way to Francesca.

‘Carlino!’ she cried, joy, fear, and relief mingling in her tone as she snatched his hands in hers; ‘I knew you would come. I couldn’t go with Count Carossa!’

He dropped her hands, perplexed, troubled, utterly surprised. That Francesca under the circumstances should have spoken thus, seemed to him wholly unlike her. The marriage had been a forced one, undoubtedly, but yet how doubly strange of her to come and hear him that night; how immensely she must have altered to greet him now with such words. Terror must surely have made her forget all else.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said, very gently, yet with a manner so restrained that she instantly noticed it; ‘even if this is not wholly a false alarm our best hope of escaping unhurt is just to stay here quietly. See, if you don’t mind my holding you like this I think I can prevent your being pushed by the crowd.’

‘Carlo,’ she said, quickly, relapsing into English, ‘are you angry with me?’

‘I? How can you ask such a question? I am not angry at all, not in the least.’

‘I couldn’t help it; I couldn’t go with the Count, and not know what had happened to you. Are you thinking of what people will say?’

‘No, that matters very little. But I fear you did wrong to stay.’

‘Wrong, when I love you?’

‘For God’s sake be silent!’ he cried, in a voice wrung with pain. ‘I dare not let you speak such words to me. Let us say no more at all. Perhaps the way will soon be clear, and I can take you back to the Count. I don’t understand how he could possibly leave you behind; he is very much to be blamed.’

Her eyes were full of tears.

‘You must not be vexed with him,’ she said, falteringly; ‘it was my doing. I would not go, and it was right that he should think first of his wife; she was almost fainting.’

‘His wife!’ gasped Carlo. ‘His wife! Francesca! speak! speak! tell me what you mean!’

His manner terrified her.

‘Why, he married Flora Britton, that pretty Scotch cousin of mine; she had been staying with us since her mother’s death.’

For answer Carlo, regardless of all else, caught her in his arms, and had the panic in the theatre caused their death he would scarcely have murmured, for in that moment of exquisite relief, in that restoration to him of all he thought he had lost, he lived through whole years of rapture.

‘My own! my darling! Can you ever forgive me?’ he cried.

‘I don’t understand,’ sobbed Francesca; ‘but nothing matters since you love me still; nothing matters now we are together once more.’

He thrust his hand impatiently into the toreador costume, and drawing forth an envelope held it towards her.

‘I can’t tell you,’ he said; ‘but look at these, and you will perhaps forgive me.’

With blank astonishment she looked at the cutting from the *Times* announcing her own marriage to Count Carossa.

‘Ah, who could have done so cruel a thing!’ she exclaimed. ‘This never could have been in the *Times* at all, or, of course, we should have heard of it. Who could have had it printed like this on purpose?’

‘I see it now!’ said Carlo. ‘It must have been Comerio’s vengeance!’

His wrath was almost swallowed up in the strange perception that began to steal over him of how completely evil had defeated its own ends. Comerio’s vengeance had actually been the means of winning for himself Anita’s sympathy and love.

‘The hymn we sang at Flora’s wedding,’ observed Francesca, ‘and her monogram “F. B.” just like mine—how horribly it must all have fitted in! This letter, too!—who wrote it?’

'It is from Mlle. de Caisne; she was engaged at the San Carlo, but I'll never believe that she had anything to do with that false notice. Comerio was singing at the San Carlo too. He must have induced her to write the account and send the papers, and himself have inserted that thing. I don't like Elise de Caisne, but she would never have lent herself to a fraud like that.'

'How horribly the people cry out near the doors!' exclaimed Francesca, able now for the first time to realise a little what was going on round her. 'Oh, Carlo! how frightened I should be if you were not here with me!'

The panic had evidently not been without some cause, for clouds of smoke came from the back of the stage, and a strong smell of burning filled the place. It was quite apparent that whatever fire there was must be behind the scenes, but Carlo, with good reason, feared for Francesca the dangers of the crowd far more than the danger of the flames.

They were now almost alone in the stalls, and the space between them and the stage was perfectly clear, for everyone had fled from the source of danger and had rushed to the doors, where a horrible struggle was going on.

'Is Captain Britton in Genoa?' asked Carlo.

'Yes, we are all here in the *Pilgrim*—Uncle George, and Kate, and Clare. Oh, how frightened they will be if they hear of this panic before we get out!'

'Where had they arranged to meet you?'

'Uncle George and father were to call for me at the hotel where Renato and Flora are staying. It was such a chance that I came at all, for you know how little father likes theatre-going. But they came to the yacht this morning, and begged to have me for the day, and said they had taken places for *Carmen*, and father never likes to say "No," and so I came, not knowing till we landed that Flora had planned it all on purpose that I should hear you sing.'

'They will be terribly anxious about you! Do you think you could be brave enough to walk into this smoke, which is driving everyone else away? I believe we should have a very fair chance of escaping through the orchestra.'

'Yes, yes—let us come!' she cried. 'I am not afraid of anything with you!'

He wrapped her shawl round her, cleared the way for her towards the orchestra, lifted her over the barrier, and, quickly following himself, advanced cautiously through the smoke-filled passages. Before long he stumbled up against Sardoni.

'You here, Jack!' he exclaimed. 'Can we get out? How did it happen?'

'You can get out all right,' said Sardoni. 'The fire is almost got under; they are working away splendidly with the fire-engines. I was just coming to look for you. How it started no one knows, unless it was from one of the matches flung down when they were smoking in the camp-scene,—and yet I don't see how that can have been. You'll get none of the fun here; come and look at it.'

'Not now; Miss Britton's people will be anxious; we must get out as quickly as may be. There is no crowd at the stage-door, I suppose?'

'A fire-engine or two blocking the way, perhaps—nothing worse. But what in Heaven's name has happened, Val?'

He glanced for an instant at the sweet, girlish face, which, not long before, he had watched with indignant wonder.

'Comerio's vengeance!' said Carlo, in a low voice; then, turning back, he said, 'Francesca, this is my friend Sardoni, of whom you have often heard.'

Francesca shook hands with him warmly.

'And how about Madame Merlino?' she asked. 'Is she quite safe?'

'I took her back to the hotel with my wife,' said Sardoni; 'and I believe on the way back I passed Count Carossa.'

'He was obliged to try and get his wife out quickly,' explained Francesca. 'Oh, I hope Flora wasn't hurt in the crowd! Do let us get back to them!'

'Come with us, Jack, if you don't mind,' said Carlo; and together they made their way through the crowded streets to the hotel, which was not far off.

In the entrance-hall they found a number of people clustered round the poor little Contessa, who was lying on the floor quite unconscious, while the Count, who had had his arm broken in the crush round the door of the theatre, received no sympathy at all from Captain Britton, who had just come ashore from the yacht, and was beside himself with anger and anxiety.

'"She would not come!"' he stormed. 'Of course not! An English girl has sense enough not to make for the door in a panic! And you ought to have stayed with her! How dare you take my daughter out, and then forsake her like a——'

Mr. Britton hastily interposed.

'John, don't waste time in talking!' he said. 'Let us come round quickly, and see if we can't find her.'

'*Gran Dio!*' cried the Count, starting forward, 'here she is!'

Captain Britton turned, and saw that Francesca was just entering the hotel, leaning on the arm of an actor gorgeously attired in Spanish costume. It flashed upon him, even at that moment, that it was a strange reversal of things which should bring him to scold a Count for his desertion and to thank an opera-singer for rescuing his daughter.

'My dear, dear child!' he exclaimed, bending down to kiss her; 'we have only just heard of the fire—we have been terribly anxious about you! You are not hurt!'

'Not a bit!' said Francesca. 'Carlo made me stay quite still, and then helped me out through the orchestra and by the stage-door——'

'Carlo!' exclaimed Captain Britton, in amazement. And, glancing round, he saw that the 'Toreador' was shaking hands with Mr. Britton, and answering as best he might the torrent of questions which assailed him on all sides.

'It is Signor Donati, the new baritone, of whom all the world speaks!' said one of the little crowd. '*Via!* I tell you I should know him anywhere. The shops are full of his photographs.'

'And he has saved the pretty Signorina from the fire!' exclaimed another.

Captain Britton, forgetting for once in his genuine glow of emotion that many eyes were watching him, drew near to the hero of the evening.

'Carlo, my dear boy!' he exclaimed, seizing his hand in a hearty grip; 'I can never thank you enough—never!'

Something in his throat choked him, and Mr. Britton, having suggested that rumours might possibly have reached the *Pilgrim*, and that Clare and Kate might be anxious, he quickly availed himself of the chance of escaping from so trying a scene, and, with a parting shake of the hand, and a 'To-morrow!' spoken *sotto voce*, which conveyed much to Carlo, he drew his daughter's arm within his, and led her away from the hotel.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV

## YACHTING

'Let us be like the bird for a moment perched  
On a frail branch while he sings,  
Though he feels it bend yet he sings his song,  
For he knows he has his wings.'—VICTOR HUGO.

'You look pale, Nita; I am afraid the fright of last night has done you harm,' said Carlo, coming into the Merlino's private sitting-room the next morning. 'It is just as well that the damage done to the theatre will prevent our keeping this engagement. They say the place is to be closed for a fortnight, and after the horrors that went on in the crush last night it is only decent.'

'The wonder is that more were not killed,' said Nita, with a shudder. 'Oh, I am so glad not to have to sing again to-night; I should always be hearing again that horrible cry.'

'Do not dwell on it, think of something else, it has made you look quite ill,' said Carlo, debating whether he should talk to her of his own happiness, but coming to the conclusion that she seemed too sad, and that it would be better not to touch on the subject.

'It is not the fright that has made me ill,' she said at length. 'I must tell you, Carlino, all about it. Comerio has been here.'

'Here this morning!' he exclaimed.

'Yes,' she shivered from head to foot, 'and I made him own that Mlle. de Caisne knew nothing of that advertisement. He got her to write the letter easily enough, for you know she was vexed with you, and he made her believe that it was Miss Flora Britton whom you were in love with, and then he posted the letter for her, and put in the cutting from the *Times*. Just think of his boasting to me of the cleverness of the trick!'

Carlo, with a muttered ejaculation, paced hurriedly to and fro, trying to keep his indignation within bounds.

'He told me how he had got it printed,' she continued, 'and expected me to praise him for it.'

'And you?' asked Carlo, with dawning hope in his tone.

'I told him that I would never speak to him again,' said Nita, trying in vain to repress a sob. 'But, Carlino, I am

afraid of him, so terribly afraid. He looked as if he could have killed me, and just went away without another word. Oh, if only I had never seen him! If only I had believed, like you, that nothing is impossible, and had resisted from the first! But he was always so strong, and I so weak and friendless.'

'But you have resisted now,' said Carlo, trying to comfort her. 'And as to fearing what he may do, I would try not to trouble about it, for, depend upon it, he values his own safety too much to do anything desperate; besides, if evil is strong, good is more strong.'

'It doesn't seem to be in this world, at any rate,' said Nita.

'Do you think not? Perhaps it doesn't always conquer here at first, but that matters little if in the end it wins.'

'You will not leave me?' she pleaded. 'If you leave the Company my last chance is gone. Ah, do you remember how I hoped at Birmingham that you would go, and that Comerio would take your place? If he had spent those two years in America with us I should have been in his power now.'

She shuddered, for something had shown her that morning the true nature of the man whom she had loved.

'I will never leave you,' he said, quietly.

Through those three years of lonely work he had struggled on, bearing Nita's selfish indifference, her fits of perverse ill-nature, and not daring to look on to the future. Now the change had come upon him so suddenly that he was almost overpowered by it. He had reaped the reward which can only come to those who live by the day; having toiled faithfully through the darkness, he emerged suddenly into a flood of glorious sunshine.

'An English gentleman to see you, signore, in the *salotto*,' announced a waiter.

Carlo's heart beat quickly as he went downstairs, yet he was less embarrassed than Captain Britton, who met him with an overpowering shake of the hand, and then relapsed into silence.

'Francesca is none the worse for the fright, I hope?' asked Carlo, anxiously.

'Indeed, I think she is all the better for it,' said the Captain, smiling a little.

There was another silence.

'The fact is, Donati,' resumed Captain Britton, dragging his chair forward with a business-like air, and planting both

elbows on the table ; 'there is no use in beating about the bush ; I have come here to ask you a plain question, and I hope you'll give me a plain answer. Do you still care for my child or not ? Just answer me yes or no.'

The bluff speech of the old sailor nearly took away the Italian's breath, but if Captain Britton really expected him to answer in a monosyllable to such a question he was disappointed.

His face glowed, his eyes shone, yet spite of the passionate eagerness of his tone, there was a dignity in his manner which appealed to the Englishman.

'I love her, sir, with my whole heart !' he said. 'I love her, and must always love her. We belong to each other, and though we may have to go through life apart, yet she is mine and I am hers, and nothing can come between us.'

'So it seems,' said the Captain, rather ruefully. 'Well, I frankly tell you that I would rather see my daughter married to a plain working-man than to an opera-singer ; but I have talked the matter over with my brother and Miss Claremont, and since your love has stood the test of a three-years' absence, and since Francesca will not lend an ear to any other proposals, I am bound to consider what is most for her happiness, though I can't candidly tell you that it is such a match as I should have chosen for her.'

'Indeed,' exclaimed Carlo, with a lover's genuine humility ; 'I know I can never deserve her, but——'

'Nonsense,' interrupted the Captain ; 'I meant nothing personal of that sort ! You know well enough, Carlo, that I am very fond of you, that I can never forget that you saved her life——' He began to feel choked, and broke off abruptly.

'As to that,' said Carlo, smiling, 'it was nothing at all. We only sat still when others were running away, and I really think we forgot fire and danger altogether at first.'

'Let us speak out plainly once for all,' said Captain Britton, clearing his throat, 'and then have done with it altogether. I dislike your profession, but I understand that you have a great future before you in the musical world, and I suppose nature meant you for an opera-singer, and that there is no use in running one's head any longer against a stone wall. After all, a man need not be affected by his work, and perhaps dramatic talent was meant to be used. I don't deny that there's something in that argument. And the great thing is that the stage doesn't seem to have spoilt you, and that I know you'll make my child a good husband.'



Between his rapture of happiness, his anxiety not to irritate the Englishman by allowing his feelings to appear too plainly, and his dazzling visions of the future, Carlo found his powers taxed to the utmost. But with an effort he forced himself to enter into a sober discussion of the case, recalled to Captain Britton's memory the fact that Uncle Guido's inheritance had gladdened the hearts of the Little Sisters of the Poor, and then told him plainly just how matters stood with regard to Anita.

The Captain was touched by his simple yet very graphic way of telling a story. He began faintly to perceive the rare beauty of his character.

'You are going to Naples now, at once, did I understand?' he asked, when at length Carlo paused.

'We thought of going there now, since the theatre will be closed after this panic, and our engagement at the San Carlo will soon be beginning. My brother-in-law is going to take a fortnight at the baths at Lucca, for he has not been well lately. I shall go home to Naples with Nita and her little boy.'

'Then come with us in the *Pilgrim*,' said the Captain. 'My brother begged that you would do so, and Sibyl will be enchanted to have the little boy as a playmate.'

After Nita had been consulted, and the matter had been a little more discussed, the invitation was accepted, and by the evening a general dispersion had taken place. Merlino had gone off to his course of baths; Sardoni and Domenica had started joyfully on what they called their second wedding tour to the Italian lakes; Carlo, Nita, and Gigi were welcomed on board the *Pilgrim*; and, in advance of all, Comerio, with hatred in his heart, was making the best of his way to Corsica.

Although, as Carlo had observed when he first set foot on the yacht years ago, the *Pilgrim* was not at all a place for talking secrets, yet the lovers were somehow well content, and enjoyed to the full those happy days of reunion. The rest of the party had a kind way of playing whist in the saloon when it grew dark; and as to the man at the wheel they were quite untroubled by his presence, nor disturbed themselves at all about the watch, who discreetly kept to the fore-castle end, and no doubt found plenty to say among themselves as to the betrothal, which was now an acknowledged fact.

'It is almost too good to seem true,' said Carlo one evening, as they sat together under the square-sail which was spread

to catch the light summer wind. On one side they could see the dark Italian coast, on the other the beautiful outline of the mountains in Elba, while the moon made an ever-shifting track of light on the sea as they glided gently on, and the red light from the port side cast a ruddy glow on the white sail towering above them. 'How little I thought,' he added, 'of having such a home-coming.'

'Yes,' said Francesca; 'and that it should have been in the dear old *Pilgrim*! How strange that is! I used to be so miserable here three years ago, and now it does seem, as you say, almost too good to be true.'

And the same happy faculty for living in the present, which had stood Carlo in good stead through his years of trouble, helped now to make his happiness perfect. No lurking fear of Comerio spoilt those cloudless days, no anxieties as to Nita's future, no troubles as to money matters. Marriage seemed still a far-away prospect, but they were betrothed, and there could never again be between them that wearing separation, that maddening dependence on outsiders for the least news of each other.

'I had heard nothing of you for two months,' said Francesca, as again, to make their present brighter by contrast, they talked over the troubles of the past; 'but that was better than having false news. You have had the hardest part, darling, and yet you'll never know how bitter it was to me in one way.'

'What way?' he asked, tenderly.

'I couldn't tell you at Merlebank, but it was knowing that you were so poor, and having money myself, and not being able to help you. Ah! you'll never know how hard it was to be able to give to anyone in the world except to the one you loved best. There is a little matter-of-fact bit in *Aurora Leigh* which I used to say for comfort.'

'What was that? Say it to me now.'

"Let us be content in work,  
To do the thing we can, and not presume  
To fret because it's little."

'I did fret, though, for, after all, we are most of us like *Alice in Wonderland*,—very fond of giving ourselves good advice, but seldom taking it!'

They laughed a little, and now it was the trouble that seemed like a dream, and the happiness that had become true, and real, and indisputable. And together they paced

the quiet deck, while below Nita's sweet, clear voice sang the familiar air of '*Oh, dolce Napoli*,' which Francesca loved because of its happy associations.

'See Naples and die!' said Carlo, smiling. 'I often thought, over in America, that I would gladly have done so; but now I think not, *carina*, much as I love it. Let us hope people in real life don't die of joy.'

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## CHAPTER XXXV

### A FINAL CHOICE

'So oft the doings of God's Will  
Our foolish wills undoeth !  
And yet what idle dream breaks ill  
Which Morning Light subdueth ?  
And who would murmur and misdoubt  
When God's great Sunrise finds him out ?'

E. B. BROWNING.

'AND so, after all, you have overcome the British prejudice and have only managed to lose your fortune!' exclaimed Enrico Ritter, looking his friend in the face with a critical air. 'It seems that you have got back your health again, too. Upon my word, I think knight-errantry is a profitable calling, always supposing you haven't a cantankerous relative to cut you off with a shilling. I shall think of taking to it myself soon.'

Carlo had landed at Naples late on the previous evening, and now, after the mid-day breakfast with the Ritter household and a long talk with his old friend, was making his way back to the Palazzo Forti in the cool of the afternoon. He was in the best of spirits, and had just been giving Enrico the account of all that had passed during the last few weeks.

'You still set up for being an egoist, I see,' he replied, with a laugh.

'Well, every man must have his theory of the universe,' said Enrico, with a mischievous side-glance at his friend. 'Ah! by the bye, you should shake your fist at that house over there on the right; it belongs to the Little Sisters of the Poor, and ate up all your money.'

'I should have been glad enough of some of it in America,' said Carlo, with a smile. 'However, no doubt our poor Neapolitans wanted it quite as badly. Oh, wait! how fast you walk! Let us stop and see the view from this terrace just for half-a-minute—dear old Capri again, how natural it looks! You would laugh if you knew how homesick I have been over in the New World.'

'I must make a note of that,' said Enrico. 'In my future knight-errantry I'll take good care to keep in Italy.'

And so, with laughter and friendly teasing, they walked through the busy streets until they came in sight of the dingy old palazzo, at the door of which an ostler was holding a beautiful cream-coloured horse.

'Come in and see Anita,' said Carlo; 'she will have had her *siesta* by this time.'

And Enrico, though he detested Madame Merlino, consented to go in to please his friend, and made himself very amiable to her while Carlo opened a telegram which had arrived for him during his absence.

The message was sent from Pozzuoli by Captain Britton, and was to this effect,—

'We hope you will dine with us to-night. I have ordered a horse to be sent round for you. Do not fail us.'

'Nita, should you mind if I went to Casa Bella?' he asked. 'The Captain seems to want me over there, for he has even taken the trouble to send a horse for me. I will be back, of course, to-night.'

'If that was the horse we saw waiting outside you will get there in no time,' said Enrico; 'it beats your old Arab.'

But this Carlo would not allow, and amid much lively discussion as to his old favourite, he nodded a farewell to Nita and Gigi, and ran downstairs, his heart beating fast at the prospect of seeing Francesca again so soon.

'*Auf wiedersehen!*' said Enrico, as he watched his friend ride away. And the bright look and gesture in response kept recurring to him as he walked back to his office.

'What in the world is that fellow made of!' he said to himself. 'He is for ever upsetting all my calculations and disturbing my pet theories. He even seems to have roused up that heartless, insipid Anita; for the first time I actually saw a kind of likeness between them. One could at least tell that they were brother and sister.'

To be once again on the familiar road to Pozzuoli made Carlo's heart glow within him. Every tree, every house,

seemed like an old friend ; his eye noted each slight change wrought during the three years of absence, while his mind recalled the past with little but a tender remembrance of the bygone happiness. As he drew near to the grotto of Posilipo he instinctively slackened his pace a little, glancing up with eyes full of glad recognition at the lovely hillside, with its tangled growth of birch, and pine, and cactus, clustering about the place which is supposed to be the tomb of Virgil.

It was at this moment that a close carriage drove quickly past him ; he would have taken no particular notice of it had he not, with his keen and practised observation, noted even in the brief moment of passing the remarkably fine eyes of one of the occupants. Where had he seen them before ? Both the eyes and the searching glance seemed familiar to him, and racking his memory he at length brought back a mental picture of a water-seller's stall, and of a young man of strong and sinewy frame, who had arrested his attention last night by a certain picturesqueness of attitude as he stood watching the crowd glass in hand ; for an instant they had looked full at each other, and the piercing glance of the stranger had lingered in his memory, and he had thought to himself as he passed on that even in Italy one did not often encounter such splendid eyes.

Entering the lofty archway of the grotto he passed on into the dark tunnel, which seemed to him more than ever like the long nave of some vast cathedral, the lights gleaming at intervals making the surrounding gloom only more apparent. He smiled a little to himself at the recollection of sundry boyish terrors never confessed to any living creature and never given way to ; he remembered how, now and then on his way home from Naples, there had been times when the horrible feeling of an unknown 'something' waiting to spring out upon him from the darkness had set his heart beating fast, and had made him resort in desperation to a Paternoster ; and he acknowledged to himself that there was perhaps some slight excuse for those past terrors, since, after all, the grotto was an eerie place, and the road, even at this hour in the afternoon, lonely enough.

But recollections of old times began to give place to the absorbing consciousness that he was on his way to Francesca, and as he left the dimly-lighted tunnel behind him and emerged into the dust and the afternoon sunshine, he fell into a happy reverie. He was to see her again, and she was his, and the trouble was all over, and the separation ended, and life was so

bright that already those weary years seemed to him like a dream and the glad anticipation like a return to real waking existence.

She would be waiting for him at the gate of Casa Bella, and they would go once more to the old belvedere where he had first told her of his love; he would make her stand once more under the datura tree where she had stood long ago when the trouble was just beginning to darken on the horizon, and he should see her now again as he had seen her so often in his dreams, with the creamy flowers drooping down over her dusky hair and her eyes shining into his.

He smiled to himself with the rapture of the thought, and touched up his horse, grudging every moment that kept him from his love.

He had ridden about two miles beyond the grotto and had nearly reached the cross road which leads towards Agnano, when he was roused from his dream of happiness by his horse shying violently at the sudden apparition of a man rushing across the road. All his attention was needed to quiet the animal, and it was only when he found himself surrounded by four formidable-looking ruffians that he realised another danger. There was just time for him to give his horse a smart stroke over the shoulder which made it bound forward, but the effort was useless, for one of his assailants instantly caught the reins in a firm grip and the next moment he was dragged from his seat. With all his might he struggled to free himself, but it was only for a minute or two that he could even keep his footing; a hand held his throat so tightly that to cry out for help was impossible, to breathe at all difficult, and, though he fought gallantly, and by adroitness and agility rather than strength managed to give his captors some trouble, it was inevitable that he should succumb. Bruised, shaken, half choked by the relentless grip on his throat, he at length felt his strength overborne, and struggling to the end, was forced down on to the dusty road. Then came a moment's breathing-space, for the hand at his throat relaxed its hold and another and a coarser hand was substituted for it. One of the men broke the silence, speaking in a low, hurried voice,—

‘Now then, Lionbruno, the blow—quick!’

To move was impossible. Three powerful men held him down in the dust, a fourth was apparently told off to murder him. He had time for only two thoughts—Comerio's vengeance and Francesca's grief; and the pang of this last thought was so terrible that the prompt blow on the head

which put an end to consciousness was, perhaps, more merciful than preparation or delay.

When he came to himself he remembered nothing that had passed, but awoke to a consciousness of intense physical misery. He gasped for breath and became aware that his mouth was tightly bandaged; there was, moreover, a covering over his face—perhaps a shroud! and in the horror of that thought he instinctively tried to raise his hand and make feeling supply the place of sight, but he found that his arms were tightly strapped to his sides. Restored still further to life by the mere astonishment and dismay, he perceived that he was in a carriage which was being driven rapidly along a rather rough road, his head ached terribly and felt heavy and confused, and he was sinking back into a sort of stupor and vaguely wondering how long he should have to bear the pain of the jolting vehicle, when the silence was broken by a voice near him.

‘*Per Dio!*’ who would have thought such a small-made man would have given us so much trouble!’

‘He fought so well that our courteous Lionbruno was in fifty minds about knocking him on the head,’ said another speaker, sarcastically.

‘*Accidente!*’ broke in a much younger voice; ‘nothing of the sort, I tell you. Comerio has had to pay a good price for his pretty *prima donna*, but he has not given us a *lira* too much for this business,—it was a risky thing in full daylight. *Sacramento!* the fellow is coming to himself!’

The mention of Comerio’s name had brought back everything to Carlo’s remembrance, and the intolerable words which followed filled him with an anguish which, for the time, made the physical pain non-existent. He started forward, found his feet unfettered, and began to writhe and struggle in a vain effort to free his arms. Instantly strong hands forced him down again, and heavy boots kicked his shins into unwilling stillness.

‘Be so good as to use your common-sense, signore!’ said the young voice at his elbow. ‘You are our prisoner, and wholly at our mercy. Your life is in no danger at present, but if you resist we shall put an end to you to save ourselves trouble.’

‘Bravo! bravo!’ cried another voice, stifling a laugh. ‘Lionbruno is such an orator that we shall soon have him as a Deputy, and then he can travel free of cost!’

‘There was a little more stifled laughter, then silence again, broken only by the sound of the horses’ hoofs and the rumbling of the wheels.’

Terrible thoughts rushed through Carlo's mind. He saw Anita at the mercy of Comerio, her husband away, Sardoni out of reach, himself altogether powerless. The intolerable realisation of his own helplessness almost maddened him, and his brain, still confused by the stunning blow, refused to be controlled. If he could have seen with his eyes—if he could have asked one question—if he could have freed his arms from the cords which bound them,—the horrible suspense and anxiety would have been more bearable; but he was, as his captor had said, wholly at the mercy of others, and the perception of this made him beside himself. It was the same struggle magnified a thousand-fold which he had passed through at the time of his illness—for a man the hardest struggle possible,—to endure an unnatural and undeserved restraint, to be altogether helpless while conscious of strength, and knowing that for that strength there is a terrible demand. Such burning wrath consumed him, such uncontrollable resentment, that it was, perhaps, well for him that action was impossible, or with the blind impulse of a confused brain and a despairing heart he might have done some rash deed which, in a cooler moment, he would bitterly repent.

At length the carriage stopped, and Carlo was dragged out. The rough handling made him tingle from head to foot, and with all his might he resisted, for he knew that at present he stood on a road where there was at least a possibility of meeting with help, and to what these brigands were hurrying him he had no idea.

'No use, signore!' said the voice at his side. 'We are four to one, and you only make matters worse for yourself.'

Something in the tone of the speaker appealed to Carlo. His blood cooled a little, and he allowed himself to be led through what he felt sure must be a thick wood, for he could hear the rustle of leaves as they forced their way on, and could feel boughs brushing against him. As to the distance they walked, he could not form the slightest idea. It seemed to him as if the journey would never end, and his assailants were evidently in a hurry, for, spite of the rough, uneven ground, they went at a sharp pace, and when exhaustion made him hang back a little, he found himself impatiently urged on by Lionbruno, who, throughout the walk, grasped his arm, while the men who brought up the rear pushed, kicked, and hustled him at every opportunity.

At last he was so worn out that it was all he could do to drag one foot after the other, the craving for air and light



became more and more keen, and had it not been for the iron grasp in which he was held he would have fallen to the ground. A sort of dull comfort in the thought that it must sooner or later end was his only relief,—and presently the way became clearer, he heard other voices, and felt other men approaching him. Someone tore off the bandages which had kept him blind and dumb for so long, and then, dazzled and confused, he looked round.

He found himself in a domed building, which seemed to him a smaller edition of the old Roman bath at Baja, known as the Temple of Mercury. It was lighted only by two torches, which, however, shed a pretty strong light on the strange group beneath. Half-a-dozen rough, ill-clad men were clustered together close to a stone bench, on which was seated the leader of the gang, a powerful-looking man, whose rugged face and uncompromising mouth instantly checked all the hope that rose in Carlo's heart when he found himself capable once more of seeing and speaking.

Brancaleone was not at all the ferocious and cruel-looking brigand chief of his boyish fancies; he was much more like an officer of the martinet type, but his face was as hard as a rock, and he was evidently a person from whom no quarter was to be expected.

'Successful, you see, in my first enterprise, *padre mio!*' said the young fellow who had been addressed as Lionbruno.

Carlo looked at him, and saw that he could not have been more than eighteen at the outside. Undoubtedly he was the same picturesque figure whom he had noticed yesterday by the water-seller's stall; and now, as he stood beside the chief, bowing respectfully yet speaking with the freedom of a son, the likeness between the two faces was quite noticeable. In twenty years' time, if he lived the same lawless life, the young face would be probably an exact reproduction of the old.

Brancaleone turned his haughty gaze upon the prisoner.

'Your name, signore?' he inquired.

'I am Carlo Poerio Donati,' he replied. 'For what purpose have you brought me here? If money is your object, I am as poor as any man in Naples.'

The chief did not answer, but ordered one of the banditti to search the prisoner. The man obeyed, and handed the contents of Carlo's pockets to the leader, who at once singled out the watch and chain and handed them to Lionbruno.

'This is your share, my son; you have done well,' he remarked

The rest of the things he pushed collectively towards the three men who had helped in the capture; they snatched eagerly at the purse, and grumbled much to find so little money in it.

Meanwhile Carlo stood motionless. Sometimes it seemed to him that the whole scene must be some wild imagination of his own brain. Had he, perhaps, been so overwrought by the hurrying griefs and joys of the past few weeks that his mind had become deranged? Or was he asleep, and was it all a dream arising out of some confused recollections of the struggling he had witnessed in the panic, and fantastically blended with the gipsy camp scene in *Carmen*? A horrible giddiness seized him—the result, probably, of the blow he had received and the exhausting walk which had followed. He staggered a little, but recovered himself, and once more turned to the chief with the same question,—

‘For what purpose have you brought me here?’

‘You bear a name, signore, that I once revered,’ said the chief, coldly; ‘and for the sake of that I will answer you, though I am not usually questioned by my prisoners. You come here to replenish my purse. There are those who were willing to pay well for my son’s little escapade, and your stay here will be quite free of cost to yourself.’

‘I will double the sum if you will release me at once!’ exclaimed Carlo.

But the chief shook his head.

‘In the words of the proverb, signore, “*È meglio aver oggi un uovo che domani una gallina*,” nor do I ever turn from my word. Rocco, make haste with the irons!’

Again that horrible giddy confusion rose in Carlo’s brain; he was very dimly aware of what happened during the next few minutes; but the paroxysm passed, and he found that they were leading him through a catacomb, and that Lionbruno, torch in hand, headed the procession. The passage ended in a sort of rude cell, which showed signs of habitation, and here his guards left him, with Lionbruno only as sentinel. He noticed that his arms had been unstrapped, but that there was a chain round his waist to which one foot and one hand were attached, and the weight of iron was so great that he could only move with difficulty. He remembered that Poerio himself had worn such fetters for years, and again the dream-like feeling crept over him. He could hardly persuade himself that he was actually Carlo Donati, the singer, living in the peaceful days of King Humbert.

Meanwhile, the son of the chief was regarding the first prisoner for whose capture he was responsible with something like embarrassment. He had expected on the part of his victim an abject terror, a piteous appeal for mercy, which would effectually have steeled his heart against him, which would have genuinely pleased his pride, and made opportunities for cruelty delightful. But now that he had got his wish, and with exceptional coolness and daring had kidnapped his man in broad daylight and within a few miles of Naples, he found, much to his disgust, that, far from feeling himself a hero, he had a vague sense of discomfort and shame for which he could not in the least account.

'You still feel the effects of the blow, signore?' he inquired, pushing together with his foot the shavings which had accumulated about a carpenter's bench that stood in a corner of the cell. 'You had better lie down and rest.' He made a gesture towards a pile of shavings, wondering greatly at himself as he did so.

Carlo, however, took no heed of the suggestion; instead, he drew nearer to his gaoler.

'I am your prisoner,' he said, gravely, 'and wholly at your mercy, as you reminded me just now; but we are fellow-men. Do not keep me any longer in the dark! Tell me what Comerio means to do!'

'What is that to us?' replied Lionbruno. 'For the present our share of the work is done, and for the rest who cares? In any case Brancaleone will get his money. As for your fate, I don't care a fig about it one way or the other!'

'You are more of a man and less of a brute than you would have me think,' replied Carlo; 'but it is not of my fate I ask. Tell me what Comerio means to do! I know that he is at the bottom of this plot; I should have known it even had I not heard your words in the carriage!'

'So you did hear them? And that was what made you fight again for your freedom? Take my advice, signore, and do not ask too many questions. *Corpo di Bacco!* Must you, then, hear all? Well, in two days' time you will have your limbs freed from those irons, or, if not, why, your soul will be freed from your body, which comes to the same thing in the end!'

'Can you not speak plainly? Do you mean that my life depends on Comerio's whim?'

'Not on Comerio at all, but on your sister. Look here, it is all as orderly as a ceremony on a *festa*! Comerio goes to

her to-night, wins her consent to leave the country with him, and exchanges a white handkerchief with our Neapolitan agent, who on Wednesday night will pass it on to us, and from that moment you are a free man once more. Or, on the other hand, Madame Merlino refuses her lover's suggestion definitely, Comerio disappears from the scene, having dropped a red handkerchief with our agent, and on Thursday you look your last on this world. That is the matter in a nutshell, signore.'

Carlo's heart gave a bound, then a cold chill ran through him; he had indeed grown pretty well accustomed to the idea of possible violence at the hands of Comerio; he knew the Corsican's nature too well to expect him to behave, for instance, like an Englishman or an American; but, although he had never been lacking in courage, it appalled him to think that for two days and two nights he must wait in this dismal cell, and at the end of the time be murdered in cold blood. Yet what was the other alternative? Either Anita must live in sin, or he must die—there was no escape from the dilemma! To desire his own life meant that he desired her moral death; to pray for his own safe-keeping meant that he prayed for her ruin. And yet he clung to life with the strong natural instinct of a healthy man. Only a few weeks ago all had been hard and dreary for him; but now, with Francesca his own once more, with the prospect of fame sweetened by her loving sympathy, with health and vigour, and all the ardent desires of youth, how was it possible for him to be willing to be done to death in this dismal catacomb?

After all, under the circumstances, would it be such a sin on Anita's part? Was not Merlino ill-tempered enough to excuse such a step? Were not his own notions about marriage old-fashioned, as Sardoni had always declared? Thoughts such as these just glanced through his mind, yet gave him but a momentary struggle, because the life he had lived for the last three years made him on this point practically invulnerable. The real anguish lay in the temptation to put Francesca above everything—above his conscience, above his sense of honour and duty. How could he desire that which must condemn her to grief and loneliness, which must cause her the most cruel of shocks and blight her whole life? It was the old, old story of the innocent suffering for the guilty, of the strong bearing the burden of the weak, and his mind revolted from the thought of sorrow visiting the woman he loved best; he turned in horror from the apparent injustice of the law of life.

But while he lay there face downwards on the heap of

shavings in dumb, hopeless anguish, there came to him all at once the strangest consciousness that, although he was chained, fettered, and guarded,—a most helpless prisoner, not even knowing where his underground cell could be, yet that in his keeping lay Anita's fate. He knew, as he knew the fact of his own existence, that if he could not bring his will to accept this thought of being murdered, neither would she allow herself to be saved from wrong-doing at the expense of his life. At this very moment she, too, was probably wrestling with deadly temptation. Her love for him so lately awakened would impel her to save him at all costs, while Comerio's power over her would be increased tenfold by this devilish scheme which had been so cunningly laid. Clearly the Corsican was determined to win her, while, for the time, Carlo had staggered under the blow dealt him by his enemy, and was pausing, as men must, to look the evil in the face, to count the cost as they are distinctly told to do, that so they may be ready for the worst.

Anita was even now making her final choice. Whatever the scientific or spiritual explanation of the matter might be, he knew that there was between them some direct power of influence, some will-force, which made her decision depend on his actual readiness for sacrifice. It was clearly impossible that she should be saved by a figment of the imagination—a mere belief in his readiness. He must definitely desire that she might be saved from Comerio, cost him what it would, before she could be so influenced by his devotion as to choose what was really right. It must be a living fact, not a hazy illusion, which would save his sister.

And yet how could he desire that which would bring bitter grief to Francesca, disappointment to all his hopes of work in the world, a sudden end to his career? It would not even be a beautiful and glorious death like his father's or his grandfather's, but a miserable end like some animal in a slaughter-house, a horrible, degrading death in a den of robbers without a single friend to comfort him, without one farewell to those he loved! And with that the tears started to his eyes, for he saw once more the carriage just outside the arsenal gates, he remembered how Francesca had smiled at him for the last time when he parted from her on leaving the yacht, and recalled the bright hope which had thrilled in her voice as she spoke that *A rivederci!*

'My God!' he cried, 'how can I be willing to die! It is more than man can bear!'

Choking with emotion, and with a craving for air, he

raised himself a little, turning his face instinctively towards the light.

Apparently Lionbruno added to his character of brigand the more peaceful callings of carpenter and carver, and by some curious irony of fate his carvings were almost all of them ecclesiastical; in this secret retreat of banditti were to be found delicately-carved alms-boxes, destined for some rich cathedral or church; beautifully-designed rosaries, which might some day find a home in the private oratory of a wealthy noble; and crosses by the dozen, because for them the market was always good. Carlo was so much accustomed to observe things carefully, that he instinctively took in all these little details, spite of his grievous trouble. Lionbruno had set up a couple of torches in a carved sconce, had lighted a small lamp with a tin reflector, and, seated on a stool beneath it, was working with apparent laziness, but with wonderful effect, on a crucifix. For some minutes Carlo watched in silence the carving of one of the pierced hands, then a flood of light suddenly overpowered his darkness. Was it more than a man could bear, this that had come to him?

He could not submit, no healthy human nature could submit, to objectless pain or needless sacrifice; but could not he, too, seek only to do God's will and quietly take the consequences, facing world, and flesh, and devil, as the Divine Man had done in the strength of dauntless faith?

Yes, he felt that it was possible. There was in the very depths of his being something upon which he could at will fall back, a strength infinitely greater than this craving for the joys of life, and love, and freedom; stronger, too, than that side of his love for Francesca, which made him tremble at the thought of her grief and loneliness.

Carlo was no theologian, probably he could not have put into many-syllabled terms his own firm belief, but he had the insight of a pure heart and the vigour of one who has always tried to conquer his own weaknesses. In a very simple and literal way he believed that God was his Father, not in name only, but in very truth. He knew that he, in common with every human being, had it in his power to live as a son or as an alien; and he knew, by that most sure proof, the experience of daily life, that he could only overcome the cravings of selfishness, by a constant effort to come into closer union with that life-giving Spirit to whom he was truly akin, that so his spirit might not starve, but grow and develop.

The confusion, caused by physical weakness, and the shock

of finding himself at the mercy of the merciless, began to fade, as he realised the strength of that wisdom, and love, and peace, which reigns above all the sin of the world, and which is, in truth, 'taking it away' by the eternal power of love and sacrifice. He felt a sort of surprise that only a few minutes ago the struggle within him had been so desperate, the revolt against his fate so vehement. After all, what did it matter if, for a time, evil seemed to triumph and might seemed to conquer right? Had it not always seemed to be so since the beginning of the world? And yet had not good steadily advanced, triumphing through apparent defeat? Above all the anguish of his grief, and pain, and loss, there came to him, as there had often come during those three years, a wonderful happiness, the pure delight of realising the perfect will of God, and with his whole heart trying to do it.

Looked at through this other atmosphere, the future seemed less formidable to meet, though not one whit less important. A wave of horror passed over him as he realised what might be happening at that very moment, and all thought of self died within him as, in terrible reaction, he passed from the vision of perfect Purity and Love to the thought of impurity and sin. In an agony he prayed, willing now to die a thousand deaths rather than that Anita should sink into this black abyss, this hellish contradiction to all love and light.

It mattered nothing to him that many would consider his adhesion to Christ's law as to marriage mere old-fashioned prejudice; it mattered nothing to him that the worldly-wise would say he was throwing away his life for the sake of keeping his sister from the infringement of a conventional law. He knew that it was not so. For since it is the pure in heart who see God, it is also the pure in heart who intuitively shrink from evil, and realise without analysing the hatefulness of impurity.

So the night hours passed by, and he prayed unceasingly for Nita's safety.

It was not till morning that the thought of his own position returned to him.

'This must be Tuesday,' he reflected, as he rose from his rough bed. 'To-morrow I shall die.'

But the thought had lost its bitterness, for, after all, death would mean victory.

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# CHAPTER XXXVI

## 'ALL GOETH BUT GOD'S WILL'

'Whatso it be, howso it be, Amen.

Blessed it is, believing, not to see.

Now God knows all that is; and we shall then,

Whatso it be.

God's Will is best for man whose will is free.

God's Will is better to us, yea, than ten

Desires whereof he holds and weighs the key.

\* \* \* \* \*

He knows all wants, allots each where and when,

Whatso it be.'—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

'You have passed a bad night, signore,' remarked Lionbruno, glancing up from his work at the prisoner.

Carlo, who to the last retained his sense of fun, saw the double meaning which the remark might bear, and smiled.

'I have not slept,' he replied. 'And you?'

'I,' said Lionbruno, shrugging his shoulders, 'have had to wake also, that I might keep guard.'

'Do you think, then, that escape would be possible in such irons as these?'

'No, it would be impossible, even if the approach to the upper air were not well guarded. But it is one of Brancalione's laws that a prisoner should be watched night and day. It would have been irksome enough had I not turned you to account as a model.'

The crucifix was now quite finished, and the carver, struck by the face he had had to watch through those long hours, had reproduced it in the wood with marvellous accuracy, catching precisely the expression of pain, with steadfast hope underlying it, which the prisoner's face had borne through the night.

The features, too, had been reproduced so accurately that Carlo could not but recognize himself. He looked shocked, then pained, finally a faint smile dawned in his eyes, and he fell into deep thought.

Lionbruno left him for a few minutes, returning presently with a long loaf of bread tucked under his arm, a flask of *chianti* swinging from his wrist, and a huge basin of *maccaroni* in his hands.

'Come,' he said, with rough good-nature, 'let us eat. I am hungry if you are not.'

In silence they shared the food. The cell was now only



lighted by one torch, which cast an orange glow over the carved crosses and crucifixes, and shone upon the faces of the two strangely-contrasted men. Carlo, worn out with all he had gone through, looked pale and exhausted, but Lionbruno was in no wise fatigued by his want of sleep, and ate with the voracious appetite of a schoolboy. Carlo watched him with a good deal of curiosity, wondering greatly what his history could be.

'Where did you learn to carve like that?' he said at length, glancing once more at the crucifix.

'It was the one useful thing taught me at school, the one thing I ever took the pains to learn,' said Lionbruno, with a laugh. 'And when I had mastered all they could teach me, why, I ran away.'

'Was it at Naples?'

'No, at Rome,' continued Lionbruno, throwing himself lazily on the heap of shavings, and yielding to the fascination of Carlo's manner, as most people did. '*Diavolo!* what did I not suffer in those years! Cooped up in a great stone building, watched every moment, guarded as though I had been a girl, and nothing to hope for in the future but the wretched life of a priest.'

'A priest!' echoed Carlo, in astonishment.

'Ay, a preposterous notion, was it not? A mere whim of my mother's,—peace to her soul.' He crossed himself with indescribable rapidity. It was the last almost unconscious tribute he still paid to the faith which his mother had held, but in which he himself had ceased to believe. 'My father, willing to please her on her death-bed, promised that they should make a priest of me, and he did his best; but what would you have? It is not possible to turn a wolf into a sheep-dog, or an eagle into a canary. I bore it till I was seventeen, then, one night,—he rubbed his hands with glee at the mere recollection,—'one delightful, moonless night, the happiest in all my life, I broke loose from the fold, got a disguise, was within an ace of being caught, and at last got home to Corsica, half-starved, but free, and as happy as a king.'

'Then Corsica is your home?'

'*Insomma!* I have run on, forgetting that possibly you will be free again to-morrow, and may betray us.'

He looked annoyed, and half inclined to be angry.

'Do not be uneasy,' said Carlo. 'This is my last day in the world, and even did I wish to do so I could not possibly betray your haunts.'

'You seem to look death in the face calmly enough ; but it is far more likely that you will be set free.'

Carlo shook his head.

'If I were set free it would mean that my whole life had failed. Something tells me that it is not so. Therefore, you see, I must face the thought of death. And, while we are speaking of it, just tell me how it will be. Am I to be shot ?'

Lionbruno's great black eyes were full of wonder, they were very much like the eyes of some animal. He was completely puzzled by his companion, and somehow awed by him.

'No,' he said ; 'that could not be, here.'

'What then, stabbed ?'

Lionbruno shook his head.

'Poisoned, or perhaps hung ?'

Again the young brigand made a gesture of dissent ; then, with unmistakable meaning, he drew out his knife, and passed it lightly across his own throat, glancing significantly at the prisoner.

Carlo had too vivid an imagination not to shrink a little from the picture which presented itself to his mind ; he grew suddenly cold, and felt a strange stirring in his heart, and a tightening about the muscles of his throat. But he quickly recovered himself, and, with no perceptible effort, returned to the interrupted story.

'And so you escaped from your school-life, and from all espionage. At first it must have been delightful.'

'*Dio!* I should think it was!' exclaimed the boy. 'To be out in the woods night and day, to have done with the hateful old routine, and for work to have nothing but adventure and excitement—why, it was paradise !'

'I fancied all the banditti had been captured at the time of the great extermination,' said Carlo.

Lionbruno's face grew dark.

'That time gave us a blow from which we shall never recover,' he said. 'But my father somehow baffled all detection, and he will always baffle it, for he is more than a match for the Italian police in a body. Nothing but treachery could possibly beat him, and among the whole band there is not one man who would betray him, though they offered him his weight in diamonds.'

'I can imagine that he would always meet with obedience and loyalty,' said Carlo, recalling the powerful face of the chief.

'Anywhere he would be king of men,' said Lionbruno, proudly. 'And since the world gave him the cold shoulder,

he must be king of banditti. Did you hear but a month or two back of the highway robberies in Corsica? They were planned and carried out by Brancaleone. Do you remember how Count Feroni was carried off in Sicily, and kept up in the mountains till the ransom was paid? That again was due to Brancaleone. And the great jewel robbery in Naples, that, too, was the work of our band. We are like the lightning, here, there, and everywhere; our work is done in a flash, and then—*presto!* all is darkness once more, and no one can lay hold of us.'

'I remember now hearing of the disappearance of Count Feroni,' said Carlo; 'though the details were never published, perhaps for the sake of our country's honour. Do you know what that work of yours did? It killed the Count's mother; she died of the shock before his return.'

'*Ebbene!* we must all die sooner or later,' said Lionbruno, coolly.

There was an indignant light in Carlo's eyes which made the young Corsican shift his position uneasily.

'And this work of yours yesterday,' continued Carlo; 'it will not only end in murder, it will break hearts, and blight lives. Will you be proud of doing such devil's work as that?'

'A man must live,' said Lionbruno, gloomily. 'I only do what I was brought up to do. As to cruelty, Brancaleone would not have the hold which he has on the hearts of the people were he a cruel chief. No prisoner has ever been ill-used by him, and if a man must be put out of the way, why, it is done promptly and without barbarity. The day for such things is past; we, too, are civilised, our plots are more refined, as well as more successful, now that we have the telegraph always at our command.'

Carlo started.

'Do you mean, then, that the telegram I had yesterday was your doing? Was it a mere trick?'

Lionbruno laughed, and rubbed his hands together.

'Was it not clever? The first idea was a note of invitation from the English Captain; but then there would have been the danger of the handwriting not being right. The telegram was my notion, and the sending it in English made it doubly safe; it was only because I had thought of it that I was given the charge of the whole affair, for, after all, I am young for such work. *Dio!* what sport it was! The watching for the yacht, and dogging your steps everywhere, while all the time you were so happily ignorant; then the breathless race to Pozzuoli to send the telegram, and the anxiety of the afternoon when

we did not know whether, perhaps, you might not after all refuse to go. How happy I was when I saw you by the Grotto of Posilipo! And you, too, looked happy. Ah, I shall never again have a better bit of sport!

Carlo shuddered, the unblushing avowal made him recoil as from some hellish thing. He did not say a word, but Lionbruno noted his expression, and never forgot it.

'Come!' he said, his tone suddenly changing, 'I can't stay all day in this dull hole. We will see what the others are up to.'

'Can I not stay here in quiet?' pleaded Carlo.

But Lionbruno was inexorable. A prisoner must be watched day and night, and Carlo had to endure as best he could the long hours of that weary day, while his young guard whiled away the time with cards, *mora*, and idle jesting with the elder men of the band.

At length night came, and once more prisoner and gaoler made their way through the winding catacomb to the inner cell. Lionbruno, who had slept at intervals through the day, took up his carving once more, and Carlo, wearied with the noise and confusion which for so many hours he had had to bear, and still suffering from the effects of the blow he had received, stretched himself again on the heap of shavings.

'My last night,' he reflected, then, turning to the young Corsican, asked what time the messenger would arrive the next day.

'Possibly not till midnight,' replied Lionbruno, pausing in his work to look at the prisoner; 'but you will be placed in readiness at eleven. After all, I would as soon not see you murdered, though I know you think me a sort of devil.'

'I think you nothing of the kind,' said Carlo, with a vigour of denial which startled his companion. 'The pity of it is that you are a man, meant for something very different, and yet willing to do the devil's work.'

'I am only taking by force the share of property that the world won't give me fairly,' said Lionbruno, doggedly. 'If all things were equally divided there would be no need of banditti. As for your devil, I don't believe in him, nor in your God either; and that, too,' he pointed to the crucifix, 'is all a fable! If it were true, why, instead of paying a hundred *lire* for a carving like this, to put in a private oratory, men would be dying on crosses themselves!'

Lionbruno, with his school recollections, and his angry bias against everything connected with the Church, would certainly have had the best of it in an argument, but Carlo

was too well accustomed to living with people who despised all that he most revered, to feel moved to speak; he had learnt long ago that, as a rule, words do but stir up strife, and that he at any rate must keep to deeds. He was quite silent now, and through the long, quiet hours the vehement words that had last sounded in the cell kept ringing in his ears. Partly from the strain of physical and mental suffering, partly from a growing sense of nearness to the unseen world, he had all along found it very hard to realise his surroundings; the old Roman building, hidden away below the earth's surface, the winding catacomb, the gloomy little cell with the carvings leaning against the rocky wall, all seemed to him more like scenes that he had read about than actual places where he was now living. Brancaleone, too, and his followers, seemed to him like people in a dream that is over, though he had listened all day to their foul talk, and wearied of their noisy quarrels. But something in the words which his companion had last spoken roused him to a greater feeling of reality; he made an effort to realise to himself the sort of life that this mere boy of eighteen was living, and the more he realised it the more he pitied him, and the more he felt drawn to him. Again and again his eyes turned to the dark, resolute, handsome face of the young Corsican; it had not yet acquired the cold wickedness of Brancaleone's face, it was too young and boyish for that, too full of mere animal delight in existence; but another year or two of this wild life would make him merely a younger and more headstrong edition of his father.

'You do not sleep, signore,' observed Lionbruno, looking up from his work as the prisoner moved restlessly and the dismal sound of clanking irons echoed through the quiet cell.

'They say a condemned prisoner always sleeps well on his last night,' said Carlo; 'but I never felt more wakeful in my life.'

'Then tell me your story,' said Lionbruno, 'for it is dull enough with nothing to do but keep guard. I told you of my life yesterday, now tell me of yours.'

Willing to please his companion, and with a feeling that on this his last night it would comfort him to go once more over his memories of the past, Carlo told in his spontaneous, graphic fashion the story of his life, and Lionbruno listened with rapt attention, partly because the prisoner was a good *raconteur*, but chiefly because he was conscious of something which was a most novel contrast to anything he had yet come across in the world. It was nothing but a summary of facts which Carlo

gave him, but Lionbruno was artist enough to have a quick eye for beauty, and a capability of reading between the lines, as it were, while the mingled openness and reserve of the story, the lack of self-consciousness, yet the innate modesty of the speaker, forced him to perceive a new idea.

His own words returned to him,—‘If it were true, men would be dying on crosses themselves!’ Then he looked from the earved crucifix to the face of the prisoner, and again back to the crucifix. After all, was it something more than a fable? Deep down in his heart there awakened a new, uncomfortable, unwelcome conviction, which he did his best to smother, because he saw that it would work havoc in his life, and Lionbruno in this respect was as lazy and conservative as most people; a revolution in society was what he longed for, but a revolution in his own heart and life could not be tolerated, the bare idea made him feel as uncomfortable and perturbed as a wealthy landowner who thinks with dread of a possible reform of the land laws.

All the next day he was markedly civil to his prisoner. He even sacrificed himself so far as to remain in the dreary little cell, instead of insisting, as before, on spending the time with the rest of the gang. Carlo spoke little, for grief and suspense and the long-continued sleeplessness had brought him almost to the last stage of exhaustion, but what few words he did say were courteous and pleasant, and in tone not otherwise than cheerful. Lionbruno began to think more and more distastefully of the scene that would be enacted that evening, and, as the time drew near, he could bear it no longer, but summoning one of the elder men to keep guard in his place, sought out the chief and begged to speak alone with him.

Brancaleone led the way from the gloomy underground retreat to the open air. Already it was dark, but here and there, between the thick foliage, were little spaces through which stars gleamed down coldly. Lionbruno gave a gasp of relief as he found himself once more above ground, for the atmosphere down below was not a little trying to one accustomed to an out-door life.

‘*Padre mio*,’ he said boldly, ‘should the red flag be sent to-night, why should you not keep the prisoner longer and make money out of him? He has rich friends, he is a popular singer, thousands would be interested in his fate, we could extort an enormous ransom.’

‘Is that all you have to say?’ said Brancaleone, with

scorn. 'Did you ever know me go back from my word? If Comerio is true to his bargain, do you think I shall play him false?'

'At least I have some right to speak for the prisoner since I was the one who took him,' said Lionbruno, with deep resentment in his voice.

'No right whatever,' said the chief, coldly; 'you are merely one of my band; your duty is to obey orders, not to think.'

'I tell you,' said Lionbruno, with an angry gesture, 'if you kill him you will regret it some day. A man like that can't be murdered lightly.'

'What do you know about him?' said the chief, tauntingly.

'I know that he is the only true man I have ever seen, while we are brutes—worse than brutes!' said Lionbruno, with passionate vehemence.

Brancalcione suddenly turned upon him and grasped him by the shoulder. 'Say another word, and you yourself shall be the one to cut his throat!' he said, in a voice that was none the less furious because low and restrained.

With a heavy heart Lionbruno followed the chief back into the secret retreat, returning an impatient oath to the teasing inquiries of the other men, while he lighted his torch at the fire before making his way through the catacomb.

'Bring the prisoner in at once,' said the chief, eyeing his son distrustfully.

Releasing Nicolo from his post in the cell, Lionbruno, still bearing the torch, came close to the pile of shavings and bent down over the prisoner.

'I have tried to save you,' he murmured, 'but it was all in vain. When I took you prisoner I did not know what I know now. Give me your pardon, signore. I would gladly undo the past, were that possible.'

Carlo grasped his hand.

'Undo it by breaking with it and starting afresh,' he said. 'And, look, will you do one thing for me?'

Lionbruno made a gesture of assent.

'See, to-day, while you slept, I wrote this letter; if necessary you can read it, there is not a line in it that can betray you. Promise me when I am dead to send it. I have no stamp, but there is the address.'

Lionbruno glanced at the note, saw that it was directed to 'Miss Britton,' and without further comment thrust it into his pocket.

'Brancaleone orders you to be brought in,' he said, huskily. 'Are you prepared, signore?'

'Quite,' replied Carlo, standing up, and speaking as calmly as though no terrible ordeal awaited him.

And yet it was not that he shrank from it less than other men would have done; he looked regretfully round the little gloomy cell, and slowly followed his guide through the winding catacomb and out into the larger building, perceiving even then the picturesqueness of the scene with its deep shadows and glowing torchlight. Brancaleone sat smoking as composedly as though no murder were contemplated that night; close by, Nicolo stirred the contents of a caldron which hung over a charcoal brazier, while the rest of the men were playing cards and quarrelling among themselves. The chief turned his cold eyes on the prisoner.

'My messenger may arrive any time within the next hour,' he said. 'You will therefore be ready for your fate, whatever it may be. Should we have been betrayed, and should a rescuing-party be sent with him, you will instantly be shot. Should you see him wave a white handkerchief, it will mean that you are free; should he wave a red one, you will feel the sharpness of this knife.'

Carlo replied only by a slight gesture. His dignity appealed to Brancaleone, who eyed him curiously, knowing that never before had he met with such a prisoner.

'Rocco! Maso! take your places!' he called peremptorily.

Two of the men instantly threw down their cards; and Carlo found himself taken to that end of the building which was farthest from a dark archway, presumably leading to another catacomb, and from thence to the upper air. On either side of him stood a ruffianly-looking Neapolitan, with a loaded pistol held within a few inches of his temples; and to the right hand, and a little in advance of the others, sat the chief ostentatiously sharpening his knife. It was an ordeal that would have tried the strongest nerves; the horrible, grim suspense of it was a torture such as Carlo had never conceived; and nothing but long practice in self-control could have enabled him to keep up under the sickening anticipations of the butchery that was soon to take place. With a strong effort he turned from such thoughts, not even allowing himself to watch the dark archway opposite, where his imagination kept picturing a confusion of red tokens and white tokens, until he was as much dazzled as Gigi used to be over the Pears' soap puzzle in England. With a pang he remembered that he had never said



good-bye to the little fellow ; and a hundred trifling recollections of unfinished work rushed through his brain, till a flash of Brancaleone's knife in the torchlight recalled him to the terrible present. Then he fixed his eyes steadily on the cross which Lionbruno was carving, and again the thought of his visible surroundings faded.

By and bye came visions of what lay beyond this hour of torture. He thought of the evil defeated, of Anita saved for ever from Comerio's influence. He pictured to himself how she would pass unscathed through her hard life, with Gigi to shield her, with Francesca to comfort her and cling to her for his sake, with a love for him which should be an actual safeguard, not a vague regret. But with the thought of Francesca, there came once more the wild clinging to life. She would be his, indeed, in another world ; but he craved for her now, he shrank back from the parting—the unknown change.

For, reason about it as we may, all endings are hard. We ended our schooldays regretfully, and shrank a little from stepping out alone into the fuller and freer life, for which all along we had been preparing. It was not that home was less dear ; it was not that we were less eager to begin life ; it was only that human nature cannot say the irrevocable 'never again' without a pang.

And, after all, the past had been happy, spite of all the troubles. Standing there, face to face with death, he seemed to live it all through once more. He thought of his quiet childhood, of his mother's devotion, of his happy betrothal. Once more he lived through the story of his love for Francesca, with its brief gleams of rapture and its long years of wearing separation ; once more he lived his art-life—triumphed in this character, failed in that, faced abuse on and off the stage, felt the glow of genuine success. And again he lived through the pain and bliss of that night at Genoa, with its violent reaction, its rapture of faithful love ; again he felt Francesca clinging to him, heard her words of perfect trust, knew that the anguish of the past had been a mere device of Satan.

But Brancaleone moved, and the torchlight fell again on the cold steel blade. In a few minutes there must come that awful helplessness, that violence, and anguish, and slaughter. His heart throbbed wildly ; and once more, to calm himself, he turned his eyes to Lionbruno's cross. The boy's words returned to him, 'As to that, it's a mere fable ! If it were true, men would be dying on crosses themselves !'

'How little I have done to prove that it is truest truth, and no fable,' he thought, sadly.

'Yet for these last three years you have honestly tried to follow me,' said a Voice in his heart. And the words of comfort brought him a great gladness, for he knew that, slowly and stumblingly, and with an amount of effort that proved his own weakness and the strength of the Divine help that had been his, he really had tried to live the life of the Crucified, with its whole-hearted seeking of the Divine will. After all, was any happiness to be compared to the happiness that came to him even in this last extremity? Was there not a deep truth in the poet's idea that the Divine will is sweetest to us 'when it triumphs at our cost'?

'If ever a man were ready to die it is that man,' reflected Lionbruno. 'But, *corpo di Bacco!* how shall I sit patiently by and see him murdered!'

He shuddered, and yet something in the beautiful, manly face raised him above the thought of the scene of bloodshed. How was it that this man, in the first flush of youth and strength, could willingly give up everything—even life itself—to save another from sin? How was it that he could stand for an hour face to face with a most horrible death, yet show neither fear, nor resentment, nor bravado—only a noble, intrepid calm?

Into the brigand's semi-cultivated mind the sight flashed something more than the unwelcome conviction of the previous night. All his shallow unbelief died in the light of that revelation. It was not that he now believed there was a God, he *knew* it; he knew that the Son of God must indeed have taught men how to live and die; he saw that he had before him, on the one hand, a proof of the heights to which men could rise who followed at all costs the guidance of the Holy Spirit; on the other, of the depths to which men could sink who sought at all costs their own pleasures.

The place had been strangely still for some minutes. Nicolo had left his caldron, and now lay on the floor smoking; the card-players had finished their game, and seemed to think it was not worth while to begin another before the event of the evening came off; one swarthy, black-bearded fellow shuffled the cards, the others lounged at ease, watching the prisoner indifferently.

When at length a voice in the distance spoke the password, every one present started slightly. Carlo drew himself up to his full height, and looked steadily towards the dark archway;

Brancaleone rose, and, with one hand on his victim and the knife in the other, glanced over his shoulder, ready either to strike or to forbear; Lionbruno dropped his cross, and glanced in great agitation from the archway to the prisoner, and back again to the archway. The footsteps drew nearer; the messenger suddenly turned the corner, and emerged into sight; the torchlight fell on the token in his hand—was it white or red? With a gasp of relief, Lionbruno sprang forward and seized the handkerchief, waving it joyfully in the air; while the messenger advanced and handed a sealed packet to the chief, who at once sheathed his knife and turned to the prisoner.

‘You are free, signore,’ he said gravely.

‘Nita is ruined! I have failed!’ thought Carlo.

The sharpest pang he had ever had to bear shot through him; and, without a word, he fell to the ground.

‘*Diavolo!*’ exclaimed the chief. ‘I have often seen a prisoner overcome on hearing his death-sentence, but never yet on getting a reprieve!’

Lionbruno looked with many conflicting feelings at the face which had grown so familiar to him. ‘*Per quanto è vero Dio!*’ he remarked, with an expressive gesture, ‘he really did then care more for his sister’s honour than for his own life!’

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### AT PALAZZO FORTI

‘Love is enough: ho, ye who seek saving  
Go no further; come hither; there have been who have found it,  
And these know the House of Fulfilment of Craving;  
These know the cup with the roses around it;  
These know the World’s Wound and the balm that hath bound it;  
Cry out, the World heedeth not, “Love, lead us home!”

He leadeth, he hearkeneth, he cometh to youward;  
Set your faces as steel to the fears that assemble  
Round his goad for the faint, and his scourge for the froward;  
Lo his lips, how with tales of last kisses they tremble!  
Lo his eyes of all sorrow that may not dissemble!  
Cry out, for he heedeth, “O Love, lead us home!”

WILLIAM MORRIS.

ON that Monday evening, after Carlo had started for Casa Bella, Nita dined alone, Gigi hovering round, and always ready to

accept promiscuous mouthfuls off her plate like a pet dog. When the child had gone to bed, she sat down to the piano, her fingers roaming over the keys and playing a sort of subdued accompaniment to her reverie.

'I am going to turn over a new leaf,' she thought to herself; 'it is after all rather pleasant to be good, and not so hard as I thought. I have enjoyed these days on the yacht with the Brittons; it was not half so dull as I expected. There was something so peaceful and quiet about it. I think I'm tired of being naughty. Now I'll be like Carlo; that will be a novelty.'

She was interrupted by the entrance of the servant with a visitor's card. Holding out her hand for it carelessly, she glanced down at the name and saw that it was Comerio's. A terrible fear seized on her.

'Say I do not receive to-night. I am engaged—not well!' she exclaimed breathlessly.

The servant retired, but in another minute came back still bearing the card, on which Comerio had pencilled a few words.

'You must see me on a matter of life and death!'

Nita's colour came and went, but to refuse now seemed to her impossible, and the next minute she was alone with her lover. Yet, after all, did she love him or hate him? Of one thing only she was conscious—that with all her heart she feared him, and that over her he had some strange, deadly influence.

'How can you dare to come here!' she cried, passionately. 'Did I not tell you I would never speak to you again?'

Comerio smiled.

'I come because I love you,' he replied; 'because I knew you would not keep to your threat; because, happen what may, I will never give you up. I have waited for you all these years, Nita, but now you will be mine.'

'Never!' she cried, vehemently; and, with a growing sense of terror, she tried to pass him and reach the door.

'Do not speak too hastily,' he said, intercepting her; 'you are altogether in my power. Your brother has thwarted me for long; now it is my turn. If you wish him to die, to be murdered for your sake, you will refuse to come with me. If you wish to save him you will leave Naples with me to-night; we will fly to Australia and begin our new life there!'

'Oh! it isn't true,' sobbed Nita; 'it can't be true! Carlo could never be in your power!'

'Not true?' said Comerio, with a mocking laugh. 'It is as true as the Gospel. Do you think the Pozzuoli road is so much frequented that I couldn't have him waylaid? I tell you his fate rests in your hands. Now choose!'

'You must be a fiend!' sobbed Nita. 'Only a fiend could make such a plan!'

'A fiend or a lover,' said Comerio. 'All is fair in love and war, Nita, and I love you—I love you,—and I will have you. You shall not deny me!'

Again the old subtle influence crept over poor Nita's tempest-tossed heart; it needed only half-an-hour of Comerio's impassioned pleading to break down all her resolutions. After all, her life was hard and weary, and her husband rough and overbearing, and goodness was dull, and this scheme was exciting; besides, it would save Carlo—Carlo, whom she really loved. Yes, she would save him at all costs; she, too, would be self-sacrificing—she would give up everything to save him from death.

It was all over very quickly—the dispute, the struggle, the promise,—then once more she was alone with but a few hours in which to make all arrangements for her flight, for Comerio had promised that a carriage should be in waiting for her at twelve o'clock, and had hastened off to see that all his plans were in working order. He had absolute confidence in his own power over her, which was indeed great; but there was another Power which he had forgotten to take into account—a Power which could no more be laid hold of, and shut up with Carlo in the brigands' retreat, than the wind.

'He shall not die for my sake!' sobbed Nita to herself; 'I will save him by yielding. And yet—yet it is what he would say was wrong; he would call it doing evil that good might come. Oh! what am I to do? Why did I ever see Comerio?'

She was like a poor terrified bird in a cage, flying now to this side, now to that, but meeting always with hard, impassable bars. The temptation to escape from her distasteful life, into a life that was new and untried, was terrible. And yet, as in sick recoil she looked at her past, there shone out in it always one bright light. A hundred little details of Carlo's care for her flashed back into her mind; scenes rose up before her in the green-room, at rehearsals, in desolate lodgings, on tedious journeys; and always he was there as her helper, the one perfectly trustworthy man in her world. He had given up all to save her from sin. Should she now yield to the temptation? Dared she delude herself into thinking that she sinned

to save him from death? Had not his whole life proved to her that he would rather die than that she should so fall? Sobbing and trembling she threw herself on her knees, crushed beneath that awful realisation of a decisive choice which must be made, maddened by the consciousness that time was passing, tossed to and fro in the storm of deadly temptation. It was not the breaking of a conventional law which she was contemplating; it was not a mere offence against society with which she had been dallying all these years; it was a sin. And the full meaning of that word broke on her as she knelt there. Sin was not a vague 'something' to be comfortably confessed and disposed of; it was a contradiction of good, which must work its deadly course, inevitably bringing grief, and pain, and hardship on the innocent and loving. To save her from this sin Carlo had sacrificed his whole life; could she let that sacrifice be in vain?

And, after all, was it love which Comerio offered her? Could she name it in the same breath with the love which had shielded and guarded her through those three years? No; it was a hateful, vile counterfeit of love, a ghastly parody of the truth, a veiled selfishness, which could only drag her down to hell on earth. Carlo would die a thousand deaths rather than let her sink to this! And was it even now too late to save him?

In wild excitement she sprang to her feet. Comerio, in the heat of the moment, had let something fall about the Pozzuoli road! Why should she not rush to Casa Bella and prevent her brother's return, and save him from the attack that had been planned? What gave her strength for this desperate resolution she hardly knew, but the thought itself seemed to lend her wings. She rushed to her bedroom, snatched up a cloak and bonnet, drew a veil over her face, and, without even pausing to close the door of the house behind her, crept down the long stone staircase. The *concierge* was reading *La Campana* as she glided past his little office; he was so much absorbed that he never even saw her.

And now she was actually in the street, and, for the first time since her resolution had been made, a feeling of fear and perplexity overwhelmed her, her brain seemed to reel. 'Holy Virgin, protect me!' she sobbed, and walked on blindly, too much terrified to form any clear plan of action. All at once she caught sight of a disengaged carriage, and signed to the driver to stop. He looked at her suspiciously, but she was far too miserable to resent that.

'Drive to Pozzuoli,' she said; 'to Casa Bella.'

The man, however, grumbled. It was late, a long drive, his horse was tired. Nita thrust two gold coins into his hand. 'Go! go!' she cried. 'Another if you will drive fast!'

Then she leant back in the carriage and covered her face with her hands, trembling in every limb, expecting each minute that Comerio would find out all and pursue her. The drive seemed endless, but at last Casa Bella was reached; she sprang out and asked eagerly for Signor Donati.

'He is not here, signora,' said old Dino, looking at her curiously. 'He has not been here at all.'

Nita gave a cry that brought all the household flocking into the hall. They took her into the Rose-room, and there gradually drew from her the whole piteous story. Francesca, as she listened, turned pale as death, but to endure a moment's discussion or delay was to her impossible. Before the Captain or Mr. Britton could even recover enough from the shock to frame a clear idea, she had left the room, had run bareheaded out into the summer night, and was flying to the telegraph-office. Panting, breathless, with a weight of torturing fear at her heart, she yet ran like the wind. Carlo was in terrible danger, but she might yet save him. The office was still open; she wrote without a moment's delay the following words to the Chief of the Police: 'Signor Carlo Donati was waylaid on the road to Pozzuoli this afternoon and has not been heard of since. The plot was arranged by the singer Giovanni Comerio. Arrest him immediately.'

In the meantime, Comerio, little thinking of the turn affairs had taken, was making his arrangements with the utmost calmness and deliberation. First of all he went to Brancaleone's agent, who lived in one of the worst quarters of Naples. Here he deposited the white handkerchief, which had been the token decided on, and the little packet of notes for the payment of the brigand chief. Then he gave his final orders about the carriage which was to take them out of Naples; and afterwards, finding that he had yet time to spare on his hands, he went into a *caffè*, where, to fortify himself for the excitement of the evening, he called for a bottle of champagne. As he sat there at his little marble table, he thought, with a smile, of the great success of his plans, and a funny recollection came back to him of the old days when he had lived at his father's country farm. He remembered how he had once looked out on a moonlight night, and had become so absorbed in watching the tactics of a fox that he had not given the alarm to the household. The animal had set his heart on a fine hen which

had gone to roost in an olive-tree, and which, roused from her slumbers, was watching the fox in deadly terror. He could not reach her, but with deep cunning walked slowly round and round the tree, the hen following him with her eyes in a sort of deadly fascination, till at last, from sheer giddiness, she dropped, and was carried off in triumph. The idea of punishing Donati and altogether outwitting him was delightful, even more delightful than the idea of winning Anita. But, after all, he reflected, it was always so in this world. Right could make a sort of feeble resistance, but in the end Might always triumphed. And really luck had been with him of late. His London engagement had been extremely successful, while, to crown all, he had won enormously at Monaco, and could well afford to gratify both his love and his hate.

Sauntering out of the *caffè*, and still musing over his good fortune, he was a little startled when a passer-by thrust a note into his hand, and walked rapidly on. He paused to read it under a street lamp. It ran as follows:—

‘Signor Comerio, be warned by a friend, and fly from Naples at once. You are in danger of being arrested.’

Though capable, in order to gratify himself, of a certain amount of rash daring, Comerio was at heart a coward. He had a friend connected with the police force, and did not doubt for a moment that the warning came from him. He knew that he had not a moment to lose. Still the mere hatred of being baffled in his plans induced him to risk a call at Palazzo Forti. There was yet a chance that they might be able to fly together, and now that all was known he risked little more by making this final attempt. Breathlessly he made his way through the dusky courtyard and up the long stone staircase. To his surprise, the door at the top was open. He stole in and opened the door of the ante-room, calling Anita in a low voice. He went into the *sala*, but that, too, was empty and deserted. He knocked at the door of the bedroom; that, also, was tenantless. Then, with a faint suspicion dawning in his mind that Nita had played him false, he ground his teeth together, and flung open the two remaining doors in the suite. Possibly she was with the child. Snatching up a lamp from a table in the passage, he went into the room to make quite sure that she was not there,—looked with a sort of dumb rage at Donati’s various possessions which were strewn about,—then walked up to the bed where Gigi lay sleeping with both arms flung up on the pillow above his head, and his ruddy-brown little face the picture of sturdy peacefulness. Comerio shook him by the shoulder.



'Where is your mother, child?' he said, in a voice that terrified Gigi. 'Can't you speak?' he reiterated. 'Where is your mother?'

'I don't know!' sobbed the child.

'*Accidente!* she has played me false!' cried Comerio.

Then, suddenly holding his breath, he paused to listen. Undoubtedly men's voices and footsteps were approaching. Darting to the door, he drew the bolt, then rushed across to the window, flung it open, leapt out on to the balcony, and disappeared in the darkness.

Gigi's first impulse was to draw the bedclothes over his head and sob for very terror, but some recollection of Carlo checked him, and summoning up all his courage, he scrambled out of bed, unbolted the door, and ran out into the passage, calling now for Carlo, now for his mother.

Strange men whom he had never seen before were marching in and out of the rooms; whether to run to them or from them he hardly knew.

'Here is a child!' exclaimed one of the detectives, picking him up in his arms. 'Tell us, little one, who is in the house?'

'Signor Comerio,' sobbed the child.

'*Santo diavolo!* where?' exclaimed the man.

Gigi pointed in the direction of his room.

'Through the window,' he said, with a rush of tears.

For all answer, the man tossed him on to the bed as though he had been an india-rubber ball, and leapt out on to the balcony, while the rest rushed downstairs to cut off the retreat below.

But their efforts were useless; Comerio had got the start of them, and, with darkness to favour him, found little difficulty in making his escape from Naples.

While the Neapolitan police were still searching high and low for him, he was steaming down the Mediterranean, knowing that never again could he dare to set foot in Italy, and baffled both in his love and in his revenge.

'If only I had had time to go again to Brancaloneone's agent, and change the white token for the red, I could bear all else!' he reflected.

But the white handkerchief remained just as he had left it with the sealed packet of notes, and the true love had triumphed over the false.

At Casa Bella all was confusion, and, afterwards, those fearful hours seemed to Francesca like a long, hideous night-

mare. She had vague recollections of returning from the telegraph-office, and seeing Clare and Kate bending over Nita's prostrate figure; of a discussion with her father and Uncle George as to whether she should drive in to Naples with them or not; of reaching Palazzo Forti in the dead of night, and finding poor little Gigi sobbing and shivering; of driving home with him on her knee, and feeling a sort of comfort in folding her arms round him, and letting him talk on in his happy ignorance;—then, of two fearful nights and days, while all Naples was searched, and not the slightest clue as to Carlo's whereabouts could be discovered. In the meantime, Nita lay in the guest-chamber, and many times each day both priest and doctor passed in and out.

'Why do those men come so dreffly often?' asked Gigi, one day, turning to his friend and playfellow, Sibyl, and forgetting for a minute the sham-fight which was going on between his two boxes of tin soldiers.

'Why, Dino says your mother is dying,' said Sibyl, her eyes dilating. 'But, oh! Gigi, perhaps I oughtn't to have said anything! Don't tell the others I told you!'

'But she *can't*,' said Gigi emphatically,—'not until Uncle Carlo comes back!'

And so, while the elders of the household lived through their terrible agony of suspense, the two children, who were much thrown together and left to their own devices in those days, kept their own counsel as children do, and waited gravely for Carlo's return.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### AT CASA BELLA

'Too divine to be mistook.'—MILTON.

EARLY on the Thursday morning Captain Britton was roused from a short and uneasy sleep on the sofa in his study by the sound of voices on the staircase. He rose quickly, remembering that Francesca had taken Miss Claremont's place in the sick-room, and that he had promised to be at hand in case anything was needed.

'How is Madame Merlino?' he asked, going out into the hall, where Franzoni the doctor was just taking up his hat and cloak.

'Better for the time,' replied the doctor, 'but I doubt if she will last much longer; the shock has been too much for her, and this suspense is the very worst thing. She has inherited her mother's constitution, you see, and when the heart is in question such a strain is killing work.'

Francesca moved away from the speakers that she might hide her tears. A lamp which had burnt for many hours stood on the table, gleaming faintly in the early morning light. She turned it out, glad to have some little trivial household matter to attend to, and finding it, as most women do, a relief in trouble.

Captain Britton went out with the doctor, not sorry to escape for a few minutes from the burdened atmosphere of his own house, and Francesca, knowing that Father Cristoforo was with Nita, lingered beside the open door, glad for a few minutes to be alone with her grief. The sun had not yet risen, but rosy clouds floated in the soft, sheeny sky, and a delicious fragrance came from the garden, which was all wet with dew. Everything was still and peaceful, with the restful calmness of dawn; perhaps it unconsciously influenced Francesca, or perhaps it was mere exhaustion which quieted her throbbing pulses. Certainly the sound of footsteps on the road from Naples, which yesterday would have made her heart leap into her mouth, scarcely roused her now. She just looked up wearily, too heavy-hearted to hope any longer. But suddenly the blood surged through her veins, and with a low cry she rushed forward.

'Carlo! Carlo!' she sobbed, 'you have come at last!'

Clinging to him in that first minute of rapture she forgot all else, but a second glance at his face reminded her of Nita, for he bore the look of a man who has passed through terrible suffering, and how much he knew of Comerio's plot she could not tell.

'Carlino,' she said, tenderly, 'try and prepare yourself for what I have to tell you.'

'I am prepared,' he said, in the voice of one whose work is over—one who knows that he has failed.

'Who can have met you so early? Oh, Carlo, we have tried to take care of her, but she is dying. She has been ill ever since that Monday night.'

'Do you mean that Nita is here, with you? that she is safe?' he cried, eager hope dawning in his eyes. Then, as she told him all, a light, such as she had never before seen, shone in his face.

'God has been very good to us,' he said, simply.

In a very few words he told her what had happened to him, and then, while she went to prepare Nita for his coming, he stayed below, receiving the warm-hearted greetings of the Captain, giving him a brief account of his imprisonment and release, and thanking him with tears in his eyes for having sheltered his sister. Somehow the old patronising tone disappeared altogether from the Captain's voice as he struggled to reply.

'Do you thank us for what *we* have done?' he exclaimed, with a choking sensation in his throat, and forgetting altogether to fear what people would say, forgetting even to regret the connexion with the stage. 'I wish it could have been more. I wish I had stood by you in the past, Carlo.'

As he thought of the insults he had heaped on the Italian years ago the colour mounted to his temples, and he would have given all in his power to have had over again the opportunity which he had wasted.

But before anything more had passed between them, Francesca came to summon Carlo to the sick-room, and not sorry to be free from the Captain's questions and congratulations, he followed her upstairs into a bedroom which he knew must be her own. It touched him to think that Nita should be in this place of all others, with its indescribable air of purity, and peace, and safety, with its English comforts, with its girlish ornaments and pictures. The bed stood facing the window, with its white, mosquito-curtains drawn back, but he could not see Anita, for Father Cristoforo was bending over her.

'My daughter,' the old man was saying, in his gentle, soothing voice, 'be comforted. Our prayers are heard. Try to take this joy calmly, and as a pledge of your forgiveness.'

Then he quietly drew back and, looking with loving reverence at his old pupil, signed to him to take his place.

One glance at Anita's worn, weary face showed Carlo that she was dying. He took both her outstretched hands in his, and bending down kissed her again and again. She was dying, but yet it was the sense that she was safe which outweighed all else.

For a long time perfect silence reigned in the room, then Nita spoke faintly.

'Why I liked the yacht,' she said, half dreamily, 'was because you were all so good—there was no temptation. I wanted to be good—only it was always too hard.'

Worn out, exhausted, and fearful, she had none of that natural clinging to life which Carlo had so lately felt.

'I never understood that till now,' she said, glancing at the crucifix which Father Cristoforo held on the other side of the bed. 'But now I see it all,—it is you that have made me see, Carlino.'

His eyes filled with glad tears, and again he kissed her reverently.

'You will keep to the stage still,' she said, after a time. 'Let me at least feel that I have done that much for the profession. I've been no credit to it myself, but you, Carlino—you went into it for my sake, and they will respect you. You will not leave the stage?'

'No,' he said, turning his thoughts to the future with an effort; 'I shall not leave it.'

'I should have liked to sing with you once more,' she murmured dreamily. 'When you hold me like that it makes me feel like Gilda. I tried to put you out the last time we sang that scene,—it was at New York, don't you remember, the night of Sardoni's benefit, and I was cross because my white satin had got some paint on it.'

'My daughter,' said Father Cristoforo gently, 'you will wear yourself out with talking.'

'No matter!' she said, with a little impatient motion of the hand. 'I am dying—I shall die as I please. Where is Gigi? Let me say good-bye to Gigi.'

Francesca slipped out of the room and went to find the child, bringing him in just as he was, in his little nightshirt, and with his hair all rough and disordered. She had told him that his mother was very ill, and that he must be quiet, but in the glad surprise of seeing Carlo he forgot all else, and with a rapturous shout of '*zio caro!*' sprang towards the bed. Carlo took him in his arms, trying to quiet him with kisses, and Nita watched them sadly.

'Well, it is natural enough he should care for you and not for me,' she said wistfully. 'I never liked to be troubled with him.'

'No, no,' said Carlo quickly; 'he loves you, it is only that he does not understand illness.'

And putting the child on the bed, he laid the little fat brown hands in between the cold white ones. Gigi looked at his mother with wondering eyes.

'Do you think he will have a voice?' she asked. 'He surely will sing—I hope he will. But don't let Merlino be unkind to him, promise to care for him always.'

'Always,' said Carlo. 'For your sake.'

And Francesca bent down and kissed her, while the child, aware now that something was wrong, listened wistfully.

'I have been a bad wife,' moaned Nita, 'and a bad sister, and a bad mother. Oh, Gigi—my Gigi—you must not grow like me! Be good, *carino*,—be good!'

'Yes, mamma,' said Gigi, simply.

With a sob she raised herself and caught him in her arms, but once more deadly faintness crept over her, and she fell back unconscious.

Francesca took Gigi away to Sibyl, and by the time she was able to return Anita had revived. Father Cristoforo had thrown the window wide open; Francesca stole quietly across the room and stood beside it, listening now to the old priest's hushed voice, now to the birds in the garden below; the sun had risen, and sea, and trees, and houses glowed in the roseate light, contrasting strangely with the scene within. When the last offices were ended there was a long pause, broken at length by Anita's faint voice.

'Why are the footlights out?' she asked, impatiently.

'Because the sun has risen,' replied Carlo, smoothing back the fringe of dark hair from her cold forehead.

'I can't see,' she said, with a little shudder.

Then after a minute, losing consciousness of the present, she sang just above her breath a little snatch from *Faust* :—

*'Oh del ciel angeli immortal!  
Deh mi guidate con voi lassù.'*

There was something inexpressibly touching in the faint yet still beautiful voice; Carlo's breast heaved and his eyes grew dim. Evidently she was wandering—fancying herself back once more in the old life.

'Well! it is over,' she murmured, 'and I'm tired—it's a long opera! How cold it is lying on this draughty stage! But Carlo will be waiting with my cloak, he always thinks of me, though I am so cross to him.' Then, her voice rising to a cry, 'Carlino! Carlino! come back! Oh, God! I have killed him—my sin has killed him!'

'I am here, Nita, close to you,' he replied, bending over her, while Father Cristoforo held the crucifix to her lips.

She came back to the present, and grew calmer.

'You see I never understood till you showed me,' she whispered. 'Oh, Carlo! how much you have borne for me!'

He held her more closely. 'Don't you understand that I love you?' he said.

‘Yet I wish that—I too—had loved!’ she gasped, in a voice so sad that Francesca’s heart ached for her.

After that she never spoke clearly again, only, as Carlo listened intently to the last long-drawn sighs, he caught one more faint whisper—‘*Gesù!*’

Then he laid her down tenderly on the pillow, and closed her eyes, and folded her hands over the crucifix on her breast. The sun had fully risen, and golden rays played about him as he moved. Francesca noticed it, and would not draw down the blind.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX

### AFTERWARDS

‘Man seeks pleasure and self—great unforeseen results follow. Man seeks God and others—and there follows pleasure.’—ARNOLD TOYNBEE.

FOR the next two or three weeks the story of Carlo and Anita was in everyone’s mouth; the account of Comerio’s vengeance, and the alarming news of brigandage in the very environs of Naples, created something like a panic, while, as to Donati’s share in the matter, opinions were divided. Some called him a hero, some a fool, others remarked cynically that in any case the affair would be a good advertisement for him, and that now, at any rate, he might be expected to draw large houses.

Merlino, when he learnt all, made scarcely any comment on what had happened. He merely wound up the affairs of his Company, and announced his retirement from the position of Impresario. Only in regard to Gigi did he show any sign of feeling.

‘You’ll be kind to the child, Val?’ he said, as he bade his brother-in-law good-bye. ‘I shall stay in America for a few years till this scandal has had time to fade in people’s minds. But you’ll go to the school and see that Gigi is all right, now and then; won’t you?’

‘He shall be like my own child!’ said Carlo, warmly. ‘His holidays shall always be spent with us.’

People were surprised that the new baritone fulfilled his engagement at the San Carlo that summer. Some called him cold-blooded, others called him brave and honourable, and both those who praised and those who blamed flocked to hear him.

He went his way, as ever, with straightforward simplicity, thinking of the past with thankfulness and of the future with eager hope.

'*Carina*,' he said, one afternoon, as he sat beside Francesca in the familiar old belvedere which had sweet memories for them both,—'*Carina*, here is work enough for me for months to come,—offers of engagements all over Europe. Piale wishes to know which of them we are pleased to accept.'

'We?' she said, smiling and blushing.

'You do not think I could go without you?' he exclaimed.

'You will not send me away alone?'

'No,' she said, with deepening colour; 'I don't think you would take enough care of yourself.'

'Darling!' he said, drawing her towards him, 'why should we wait any longer? Let us be married quietly while Mr. Britton and Clare are still here.'

'But they are only here for another week,' said Francesca.

'*Ebbene*?' said Carlo, with a world of expression in his tone.

'How could I be ready?' she faltered. 'A wedding takes a great deal of preparation—certainly Flora's did. I must at least have a dress that is fit for your eyes to look on.'

'If you want to dress to please me, I will tell you what to wear,' he said, smiling. 'Wear that white dress like a baby's—the one you wore on the night of our betrothal.'

'That old nainsook!' she cried. 'Why, Carlo, it is more fit for the rag-bag than for a wedding!'

He made one of his expressive Neapolitan gestures.

'I should like nothing else so well, and you will see it will wash and get up in two days' time, and look as good as new. Oh, I am very learned in such matters now, I assure you.'

She smiled, and nestled close to him.

'I will wear anything to please you, *mio caro*! And, after all, we don't want to be thinking of new dresses just now. All I want is to go away from everything else for a little while—away with you. Let us go somewhere among the mountains where there are no people and no newspapers—nothing but just we two by ourselves!'

He kissed her white forehead.

'*Carina*,' he said, thoughtfully, 'if one did not believe success to be a sort of sacrament, it would frighten one.'

She mused over the old definition in the Prayer-book, and caught his meaning.

'They said at Merlebank it was useless knight-errantry,' she replied; 'but I think they changed their minds when they saw



the smile on Nita's face after all was over. Do you remember what she said about those days on the yacht? It made me cry, for I never saw till then how fearful temptation must be.'

'She conquered, and is at rest!' said Carlo, steadying his voice with an effort. 'Father Cristoforo told me he never knew one so young who had so little clinging to life. It is as she would have wished.'

For some time he was grave and silent; his mind was full of Nita's sad story.

'Does it not seem to you more than three years,' he said at length, 'since we last sat here together like this? To me it seems like a lifetime.'

'And, oh, Carlo,' said Francesca, clinging to him, 'I don't know how it is—but, though so many sad things have come between, I can't help feeling happier even than long ago! I thought I couldn't be happier than I was when you first told me you loved me, here in this summer-house,—but now, Carlo! . . . now! . . .'

\* \* \* \* \*

So, one day in the following week, Francesca put on the old white dress and her confirmation veil, and Kate twined orange-blossom and myrtle into a wreath, and Sibyl and Gigi gathered the prettiest white flowers they could find in the garden, and with infinite pains made them up into a very original bridal bouquet. Then everyone at Casa Bella drove in to Naples, where Carlo awaited them with Enrico Ritter at his side; and presently, with Piale, Marioni, old Florestano, and Sardoni and his wife, for spectators, the two lovers were quietly married.

'After all,' said Captain Britton, when the bride and bridegroom had driven away, 'though, I suppose, a voice like that must be used, yet I shall always think that Carlo deserved to be something better than a singer.'

'My dear sir,' exclaimed Piale, vehemently, 'the life of a good singer is one perpetual course of self-denial! And, I assure you, we, too, have had our heroes. Must a whole profession be despised because some of those engaged in it are not all they should be? When a man like Donati is sent to us, for Heaven's sake let us keep him, and say, as in duty bound, "DEO GRATIAS!"'

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